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Résumé de l'article

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Technical Evaluation Report

42. Contrasting LMS Marketing Approaches

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Abstract

The first section of this report examines the *CourseCompass* learning management system (LMS), made available to educators by the Pearson publishing group as a vehicle for the company's extensive content library. The product's features are discussed, and the implications of Pearson's software/ textbook "bundling" policy for the integrity of course design. The second section of the report reviews *Wordcircle*, an open source (OS) LMS provided as a free hosted service or as source code downloadable for installation on the user's own server. The contrasting marketing approaches of these two products are discussed in the light of the increasing move by distance educators from proprietary to open source LMS products. As in previous reports in the series, the reviews are based on the six evaluation criteria of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD): cost, complexity, control, clarity, common technical framework, and features.

Product Trials

CourseCompass

CourseCompass (http://www.coursecompass.com/ccindex.html) is a customized version of the *Blackboard* platform, and is made available free of charge to instructors and institutions who purchase content from the Pearson Education publishing group. The product allows instructors to build a course from scratch, or to supplement Pearson texts with their own materials. A large selection of published examinations is available for us "as is" or modified by the instructor. Pearson hosts the server software and no local installation is required. Instructor access to the *CourseCompass* system is limited to legitimate instructors who agree to make use of publications produced by Prentice-Hall or subsidiaries of Pearson Education. Full access to a *Blackboard*-based program is provided with all downloads, instructor tools, and telephone support. For this evaluation, we were given full instructor and student access. At no time did any representative of the vendor company attempt to influence the evaluation.

A 30-minute introductory course and downloadable "quick start guides" orient students and teachers to all *CourseCompass* features that they need for their classes. The platform's screen displays are intuitive and easy to navigate. Even though its primary purpose is to act as a platform for the texts and courses already prepared by the Pearson group, the product is flexible and can be customized by instructors and students within a standard "look and feel" – an advantage for students who take more than one course. Special character palettes are available for French, German, Spanish and Italian. Students can set their own passwords and can modify their personal profiles, helping to streamline records administration. They can attend virtual classes, read and post to discussion boards, and participate in text-based synchronous chats. A digital "drop box" is provided for delivering and retrieving assignments, which can also be submitted as email attachments. Test banks are available to the instructor, mostly in a "true-false" or "multiple-choice" format, and a test-generating plug-in allows the instructor to create new tests and modify those provided with the textbook. Automatic and manual marking procedures are available, with the assigned marks stored immediately in an integrated grade book that tracks assignment completion. When giving students assessment feedback, instructors can include links to the section of the online textbook that discusses the topic in question. A calendar enables instructors and students to see the course and assignment schedule at a glance, and allows instructors to set the date on which each individual item of course content becomes available to the students. The lack of audio/video-conferencing will be noted by instructors who encourage online student discussion and interaction in these modes.

While the online version of the textbook is likely to provide the backbone of content for a course, *CourseCompass* allows various types of supplementary content to be added. Instructors can post documents, URLs, slide presentations, and other content formats in the students' documents or assignments folders, and can lead students on "Web safaris" via the whiteboard in the virtual classroom. Students can be divided into "breakout rooms" for small-group text conversations. Access to a comprehensive library of academic journals and other subscription-based content services is included with all courses offered on the *CourseCompass* platform. These include *EBSCO's ContentSelect*, the *New York Times* searchable archives, and a collection of professionally selected research sites accessed through the Link Library. An additional large section offers guidance on researching, writing essays, and citing references. *Blackboard* was selected as the vehicle for *CourseCompass* owing to its compliance with the Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) standards of scalability, interoperability, file-sharing and integration characteristics. *Blackboard* maintains relationships with major hardware and software vendors in order to ensure the functionality of its product. *CourseCompass'* success as a course delivery platform is indicated by the fact that, in just three years, it has grown to serve over 15,000 instructors with more than a quarter million students.

The merits of *CourseCompass* can be summarized, according to the evaluation criteria of the American Society for Training & Development:

Cost
- Free if proprietary content is purchased
- No infrastructure costs

- Student access can be purchased as part of textbook bundle, or as a separate card for approximately $20.00

Complexity
- Technical support supplied by vendor
- Online technical support available (slow response after business hours)
- Instructor and student documentation available

Control
- Password-protected
- Wide range of administrative features
- Different access levels for teachers, teaching assistants and students

Clarity
- Intuitive and easy to navigate
- Standard "look and feel"

Common Technical Framework
- SCORM-compliant
- Scalable
- Integrated platform
- Wide-ranging third party support
- Mac OS 9.2 or later, Windows 2000 or XP, 28.8k modem or higher

Features
- Wide-ranging content library
- Whiteboard and text-based communication features
- Easy to add content
- Integrated record keeping and administrative functions

The Coursecompass *Marketing Approach*

A concern that educators may have with *CourseCompass* is the requirement to purchase textbooks from the product's provider in order to use it. It can be argued that this obligation might steer an instructor away from more appropriate texts – although this concern is somewhat mitigated by the fact that instructors can link their course sites to additional resources covering any subject or point of view. Another concern is the fact that *CourseCompass'* content-driven approach subscribes more to a pedagogical model more suited to the traditional classroom than to online educational delivery.

Wordcircle

Wordcircle (http://www.wordcircle.org/) is an open-source (OS) LMS written in PHP, and currently at a relatively early stage of development. The current version (2.17, release 11) is available free of charge either on a hosted system or as downloadable source code for mounting on the user's own server. The evaluation team took advantage of the hosted service and developed a test course in its entirety, in order to evaluate the system from both the instructor's and learner's perspective. Registration with the *Wordcircle* system is via an email address and password. Access to "My Courses" on the host server, and the option to remove courses, are

obtained through a login script on the *Wordcircle* homepage. Course design is based on six categories (functions): course overview, content, news, discussion, calendar, and projects. The instructor mounts course materials in the Course Overview and Content areas, and can post announcements in the News area. The Discussion provides an asynchronous text-based forum; the Calendar and Projects areas allow students to make journal entries and upload files for sharing with other students and instructors. The interface, as a whole, is uncluttered and customizable, and "modify" functions are available to the instructor in all six categories. Email communication is external via the users' own email systems. A comprehensive online help system is available on the *Wordcircle* hosted site, with a public tutorial for *Wordcircle* course developers and users, and a support forum to handle unique questions and problems. The product is has been assessed as useful for small-course offerings, tutoring, and group collaboration. It does not aspire to be a comprehensive LMS, and is not designed for intensive educational programs that require assessment, student tracking, and synchronous communication.

In comparison with other LMS systems, for example, *Wordcircle*'s instructor, learner, and administrator tools are currently quite rudimentary. Any content development (other than basic text messaging) must be done externally, and knowledge of HTML coding is needed in order to make extensive format changes or to direct students to other online sources. In response to an enquiry by the evaluation team, the software developer has indicated that he does not plan to include internal content development options in *WordCircle*. Instead, he has provided style sheets to enable course developers to develop an individual "look and feel" for their materials.

Not currently available are search engine, spell-checking, self-assessment, grade development, or student records management features, or report-generating features. Case sensitivity and file naming procedures may cause problems for users unfamiliar with old DOS conventions. In its present version, *Wordcircle* does not support software plug-ins or peripheral communication hardware. No bandwidth or firewall problems were apparent during the product trial. The evaluation team accessed *Wordcircle* successfully via a 26k dial-up connection and a 300k ADSL wireless network, and transferred files from behind two different firewalls. As the product is still in its infancy, critical mass is not yet available to determine whether functionality will be impaired by a large number of users.

The merits of *Wordcircle* can be summarized, according to the evaluation criteria of the American Society for Training & Development, as follows:

Cost
- OS freeware incurring only the server and support costs.

Complexity
- Comprehensive online support available
- Hosted server has a high degree of intuitiveness

Control
- Overall interface customization available via the "My Courses" page
- Style sheet formats available for course content

Clarity
- Interface clean and intuitive

Common Technical Framework (CTF)
- Operating system-independent
- No major interoperability issues were found during the evaluation
- No ADL (Advanced Distributed Learning) protocols currently in place
- File-sharing available

Features
- Content development and learner tools need further development
- Course development currently only possible outside the *Wordcircle* interface

The OSS Evaluation Philosophy

The current evaluation of *Wordcircle* was conducted because its creator, Matt Reider, had approached the evaluation team with an open interest in receiving product feedback. Previous reports in this series have avoided direct collaboration with the developer/vendor; and Report #10 has specifically warned against the lack of evaluation objectivity that can result from such collaboration. The development of OSS freeware, however, is based on the principle that it is subject to constant, open, and freely provided user feedback; the Worldcircle website fulfils these principles completely. In this spirit, the evaluation team felt that a formative evaluation of *Wordcircle* was justified, and made a deliberate decision to work directly with the software developer on a formative basis via email dialogue. This approach's value is seen in the way that the current study has lead directly to a product modification. When the evaluators' first course trial was added to their "My Courses" page, a list of individuals who publicly accessed the trial was generated, accompanied by their email addresses. This flaw could lead to data mining of email addresses, spamming of users, or even identity theft. The concern was expressed to the product developer who immediately made the appropriate changes.

Conclusions

CourseCompass is useful for traditional classroom instructors who are already using the content published by the product's vendor. These instructors can easily create an online version of their courses to complement their regular classes at little or no cost. The product's value is more questionable when courses are not based on a specific textbook, and *CourseCompass* is inappropriate for those distance education situations where group interaction and conferencing are important. The reviewing team concluded that a major reason for the product's success to date may be that it has a high degree of "administrative efficiency" as opposed to wide-ranging pedagogical potential. If academic concerns become secondary to administrative criteria in the selection of such products, then content becomes a marginal commodity and the educational process is jeopardized.

Wordcircle is a simple, intuitive, user-friendly and cost-free interface for learning management. Users seeking a simple, functional LMS format can use it right away on the host server, or can download the code for use their own server. The evaluators recommend the product for small course development, tutoring or group collaboration, possibly used in conjunction with other freeware (e.g., *Yahoo Messenger)* for synchronous audio and text chat. Juxtaposed, these two

product evaluations demonstrate a contrast between commercial software marketing strategy, with its costs and conditions, and the product development and testing spirit that prevails among open source software developers and users. As long as *Wordcircle* remains open source and cost-free, the evaluation team feels that its formative evaluation input to the product developer has been of benefit to the product and its future users.

The next report in the series will compare open-source learning management systems.
N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses are changed, the online references cited in this report may be outdated. They are available, together with updates to the current report, at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: http://cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/. Italicized product names in this report can be assumed to be registered industrial or trademarks.

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