

LMS Review Summary

July 28, 2014

To: Dr. Sarah Witte

From: James Long

CC: Jeff Carman

Date: July 28, 2014

Re: LMS Review Summary

Summary Report on the 2013/2014 EOU LMS Review

The Reason for the Review

By summer term of 2013, the shortcomings of EOU's local Blackboard server were becoming more and more obvious to the campus community. As a local server environment on the EOU campus, Blackboard's inherent lack of redundancy was just as concerning as its rapidly decreasing systemic stability. As IT struggled to keep the platform up-to-date, every revision and patch we added reduced the server integrity instead of increasing it. Blackboard's support team was rarely effective in helping us improve system stability or in providing timely assistance.

Some of the ongoing issues EOU faced in maintaining the local Blackboard server included:

- Students were frequently dropped from online exams
- Technical glitches made both course development and instruction frustrating (i.e. visual text box editor formatting woes, unresolvable issues with specific tools like the journal and blog, frequent Javascript errors when attempting to grade, etc.)
- Add-on features frequently malfunctioned (i.e. the notification dashboard and the calendar feature)
- Courses copied from previous terms into future terms regularly created new glitches which would render course tools or content unusable.
- Browser-specific incompatibilities were too numerous to even begin to document.
- Services would degrade continually until the servers would eventually crash.
- Students with satellite Internet connections could not connect directly to the servers and required a work-around before they could access their course material.
- Unresponsive/unhelpful support personnel.

One alternative that Blackboard suggested was that we move the locally hosted Blackboard service off of our campus and into their data centers as a cloud-based service. After receiving a quote for this option, it became clear that it was not a viable alternative for us. The annual licensing fee for hosting Blackboard was \$125,000 along with a \$25,000 set-up charge. This licensing fee did not include the regular annual licensing fee (~\$60,000) we were already paying, and would continue to pay.

At that time, Provost Steve Adkison, the VP of Finance, and the EOU Consultant of Academic Technology met to discuss the topic of Blackboard in depth. It was then decided that a faculty-based committee be formed to discuss the necessity of migrating away from Blackboard and review potential alternatives to it.

LMS Review Team Roster

IT Staff

- James Long
- Bryan Pearson
- Jeff Carman

Faculty

- Jim Benton
- Rory Becker
- Tawyna Lubbes
- Rebecca Hartman
- Anna Cavinato
- Teresa Ferrell
- Michael Santucci
- Sarah Ralston
- Rae Etta Newman
- Kevin Walker
- Patty Sandoz
- Stephen Clements

Blackboard

Remaining with Blackboard was regarded as a possible outcome of our LMS review meetings. The IT personnel on the panel (as well as a few of the faculty) were antagonistic to this idea primarily due to Blackboard's unsustainable nature in addition to the negative impact it was having on student engagement. The following points were brought up:

The benefits of remaining on Blackboard

- Faculty and student familiarity
- Least expensive option (in hard-costs alone)
- No course migration required of faculty

The reasons for moving away from Blackboard

- Unsustainable in terms of support
- Non-existent vendor support
- Technical difficulties affecting student coursework
- Systemic instability and frequent outages
- Old technology (Java) at the end of its lifecycle
- Most expensive option (when considering both hard- and soft-costs)

Desire2Learn (D2L)

D2L was considered as a possible Blackboard replacement due to its sizable market share (second to Blackboard at the time of the review) and positive buzz on the web. It has a good deal of traction on an international scale.

The Desire2Learn LMS was discussed briefly as an alternative to Blackboard. Demo accounts were enabled for all faculty review team members, but it never managed to gain momentum in our conversations. One team member did have previous experience with D2L and she had a very low opinion of it. Others that did take time to navigate through the demo felt that it was similar enough to Blackboard that it would make more sense to either stay with Blackboard or go with something more modern.

From a technical standpoint, D2L is very similar to Blackboard. It was not originally envisioned as a cloud service and therefore it is inferior to Canvas as a web-based application. D2L seemed to do everything that Blackboard did, but not necessarily any better than Blackboard, so the

review team decided to reduce the LMS candidates down to either Canvas or Blackboard, as it would be better to stay with Blackboard than change to D2L.

Lastly, add-ons such as their suite of mobile applications were not always free, and it wasn't entirely clear that which required additional licensing and that which was included.

Canvas by Instructure

Canvas was considered as a potential Blackboard replacement due to a number of factors:

- Rapidly growing popularity and market share in higher education
- Modern design, Ruby-on-Rails based platform
- Native cloud-based architecture
- High reliability and availability
- Accessibility options and full compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act
- All add-ons such as mobile apps, course-based analytics, and Learning Mastery all included in the standard license.

During the team's review of Canvas by Instructure, the following input was gathered from both piloting faculty and their students.

Faculty perspective

The primary concern of the faculty on the review team had to do with the amount of work required to move highly developed courses from Blackboard to Canvas. Despite that, they agreed that moving away from Blackboard is no longer optional in light of its recent technical problems.

- Streamlined Interface, clean and modern design
- Fewer, Simpler tools, which can be good or bad
- Course migration is not seamless, may require a lot of leg work
- Highly reliable
- Excellent mobile application
- Gradebook lacks all the features of Blackboard's Gradecenter
- Speedgrader is a big improvement over grading in Blackboard
- Canvas' rubric system is inferior to Blackboard's
- Drag-and-drop file uploading is a big plus
- Its analytical, step-by-step instructional paradigm may be limiting, depending on an instructor's approach to course design
- Lack of customization options in the course/navigation menu
- Video and audio grading/feedback options are very handy

Student perspective

Student feedback has been largely positive and continues to become even more positive as they, and their instructors become more familiar with Canvas.

- Highly intuitive
- Reliable
- Notification system works well
- Dashboard area of Canvas gives a helpful view of due dates, grades, submitted assignments, etc.
- Easier to use than Blackboard
- It is frustrating having to use both Canvas and Blackboard simultaneously for different classes
- The free mobile app works well
- Discussion boards take a little getting used to, but not inferior to Blackboard's

Conclusion

After investing time in reviewing and piloting Canvas through Fall 2013 and most of Winter 2014, the mission of the LMS Review team was made irrelevant when Provost Steve Adkison made an executive decision to transition EOU from Blackboard to Canvas. This decision was made after a meeting between the provost, the Consultant of Academic Technology, and the acting Director of IT. At that point IT was encouraged to inform the President's cabinet, the Faculty Senate, and the University Counsel of this transition and present the case as to why the transition was necessary. A presentation was developed and given to each shared governance body by the Consultant of Academic Technology during the Winter term of 2013. EOU began to provide live courses in our official Canvas environment in the Summer term of 2014. EOU's Blackboard server will remain available for faculty to use in their courses until the Fall term of 2015, when it will be decommissioned.