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## *WebCT at Brown: a case study*

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Having taught French on-line for many years using a variety of tools, I was quite familiar with creating my own HTML web pages and creating interactive classes by making use of such things as Yahoo discussion boards or adding on chat, etc. While this works at the level of one course, it becomes difficult to implement such ideas at the level of a department or a school for various reasons: the course content is difficult to transfer from one semester to another; the courses pages and their links are at the mercy of an outside provider; and the student's experience is not always very smooth since they need to remember passwords, go to various addresses, deal with interfaces that lack professional design, etc.

WebCT, the course management system, that was selected by Brown University last summer alleviates most of these problems and adds specific features that were not available on campus until now. It also marks a radical departure from Brown's own "Course Publisher" since it is, in fact, far more than a publisher of course descriptions. With WebCT and its attending tools, we can all supplement our in-class teaching with a variety of tools designed to enhance communication between faculty and students during the course of a semester. In this article, I would like to describe what WebCT specifically added to my teaching practice by taking examples from my fall semester courses.

Under the aegis of CIS, a group of faculty was invited to try out WebCT for one semester in real teaching conditions. With the help of the CIS staff assigned to support the WebCT try-out, I was able to rapidly adapt to the new web environment. (*see Prof. Webb's contribution to the "Faculty Forum" on p. of this issue*)

The first course was, in fact, a transfer from a rather large web site I created some years back at MIT called CULTURA. On the site, forty (40) students from France

and the US interact via the discussions boards to compare their understanding of their cultural environment. WebCT was extremely well suited to this task since the discussion boards are easy to set-up and maintain. They allow students to know when they have read a post and be notified when a new one has been added or an answer posted to their latest questions. The content of each experiment is then stored and used the next semester as materials for another group of students. WebCT enabled me to create “content module” that are easy to navigate and, more importantly, easy to save and transfer to another course. Additionally, the tracking feature allowed me to understand how students were able to make use and navigate such a huge collection of materials (over 4000 pages). Students were informed of this feature early on in order to avoid any concern of “Big Brotherism” on my part because their final grade was not based on their use of the website. Tracking allowed me to see that some content pages were never consulted, suggesting they were either of little use or not placed at the right level. I was also able to follow the very different strategies the students use when visiting: methodologically going to every single page of one folder, or moving from topic to topic in parallel content modules. I also learned that many of them were actually printing the pages, which influenced my designs to make the content more compact on the pages.

The other course illustrates the progressive strategy that is, I think, closer to the ways in which most faculty new to WebCT will be using the product. French 50 is a course we repeat every semester and that has multiple sections taught by several instructors. I started with the course template recommended by CIT to create a central website for all sections. This initial step will be very familiar to users of “Course Publisher”. You cut and paste your syllabus into boxes and fill in the calendar tool with the dates of your exams or readings. By the flexibility of the WebCT site also allowed me to post any additional materials I had given to the students in class (answer keys, lyrics of the a song, web links). Students were instructed to check the site for new postings and changes, as well as to request any additional materials, By the end of the semester, I had about fifty web pages clearly organized on a web site that I can transfer to the next semester. I even started to put the language files from the textbook in WebCT so that students can listen to the materials at home. Next semester, instead of starting with a blank canvas, I have now a website that I can adapt and complete over time.

So far, the student’s feedback has been very positive: “the web site was constantly updated and all materials were always posted making it difficult to miss a deadline” said one. Another thought that having access to all materials distributed in

class during the semester made review easier at the end. Finally, a student who had missed the first few weeks of class (as they are bound to do during shopping period) said: “Thanks to the WebCT class site, I was able to integrate the class faster since I could tell what had been said before I joined in the discussion and figure out who the students were.” The only trouble was dealing with the students who were not registered officially in the class and could not get in the course. The class lists are updated daily by the registrar but students are notorious for not following the rules. The CIS support staff quickly created a guest password that could be used for the first two weeks and is constantly working at making the instructions for both students and faculty clearer. As more classes are moving into WebCT, students will become more comfortable with the log-in procedures and will be able to find all their classes under one URL, making their life easier.

For more information on creating a WebCT course website, please consult: <http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/CIS/WebCT/> . For more information on WebCT itself, and the pedagogy of teaching with web support, you can also start with the company website, and in particular the Online Teaching and Learning Center <http://www.webct.com/otl/>

*Ed. note: Dr. Waryn worked for both WebCT and Blackboard before coming to Brown.*