

Blackboard and WebCT

Blackboard and WebCT are two virtual learning environments used by tutors to deliver material to students and facilitate interaction between the tutors and the students, and among the students themselves. The two companies merged in 2006 and the two products became one. The Blackboard Learning System allows documents such as course notes to be posted so that students can access them through a web browser, and lets tutors create and manage discussion boards, e-mail, blogs, and live chat. Links can be created between the material and external web pages to enhance the student experience.

At the centre of the Blackboard Learning System is a database that contains information about all students enrolled on a course, all course materials, and stores all interactions (for instance discussion board posts) that have happened. When a student logs into the system they see the latest material on a secure web page, created dynamically from the material in the database. This makes maintenance of the system very easy – to upload a new document all the tutor has to do is save it in the database (again via a web interface) rather than having to edit HTML code.

Systems like the Blackboard Learning System are expensive. Critics say that this expense is wasted and that the system gives nothing that cannot be obtained for free elsewhere. Consider a tutor who wants to use email, a discussion forum, live chat and a blog – each of these things is available for free from Yahoo, Google, MSN and Blogger respectively. The tutor could upload videos to YouTube or photos/images to MySpace for free, and record his or her own audio files using Media Player. Webspace is available for free from many hosting services. Open source (i.e. free) HTML editors are easy to use to create webpages and more open source software can be used to upload those pages to the free webspace. (In any case, most universities will provide webspace for tutors' webpages and an email system, so there is no need to register for free versions of these technologies.)

Questions

1. What is the advantage of using the Blackboard Learning System over the free software that does the same thing? What are the disadvantages?
2. Create a data model for a system such as Blackboard using the approach shown in this chapter.
3. What additional functionality could Blackboard give that would be difficult for a tutor to get elsewhere? (Consider the data mining section of this chapter.)
4. Universities often choose a learning environment centrally – individual tutors may not have much say in the matter, and students even less. If you had the chance to tell university decision makers, what functionality would you want to see in a learning environment and what existing functionality (assuming your tutor uses an online learning environment) is not used by you?