Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES



Let's Talk: A Conversation with Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES

Over the last several months, our clients have been providing us with invaluable feedback about how we can improve ourselves as a company and improve our products to better serve the real issues education institutions face today. After participating in the Blackboard Learn, Release 9.1, Beta Program, Daniel Lake at Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES engaged in a conversation with us to provide feedback on how we are doing when it comes to partnering with our clients and creating a compelling product for the future of teaching and learning.

Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES is a cooperative educational service serving twenty-five school districts across the state of New York. With over 20,000 active users, Blackboard helps Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES support a blended model of education in a traditional classroom setting and extend the traditional school day as needed. They started using Blackboard products as the first K-12 district in 2000. They are currently in the process of planning and developing materials and training in hopes of upgrading from Release 8.0 to Release 9.1 in July 2010.

What new capabilities in Release 9.1 really excite you?

How do you believe Release 9.1 will help foster student engagement?

The mashup ability, and the link to the new NBC archives, with the parallel ability to find and incorporate those materials as they support specific learning standards, is a game changer for teachers. Students will engage with such media materials far easier than with text only.

How do you believe Release 9.1 will help support educator efficiency?

The ability to load all local hard drive materials directly into a class-level file area will enable the management of content to be done quicker and with better control by a teacher. It will also minimize the multiple loading of files desired in different areas, without requiring the high initial cost of the complete Content system, which, while a better solution, has a cost factor that prevents some schools from applying that efficiency.

The ability to incorporate/embed outside media directly within various interactive components of the product also helps with efficiency of delivery and design.



"While we are just beginning to apply the new K-12-specific features of 9.1, we are very excited by the new Standards Alignment and Lesson Plan tools incorporated into the product. These, along with the blog and wiki tools, create a managed learning environment that will engage K-12 teachers and administrators and allow them to apply new practices required of 21st Century learners and teachers!"

Daniel Lake OCMBOCES



How will 9.1 help your institution reach its overall goals? Which specific capabilities are you most excited about?

Our school systems are instituting various levels of curriculum mapping in an attempt to create a cohesive scope and sequence to the content taught at all levels. Release 9.1 will enable that process to be inherent within extended or online class development, and move toward tighter curricular content management.

The inclusion of Web 2.0 tools such as journals, blogs and wikis helps tremendously because it incorporates these capabilities within a single managed learning environment. Without this addition, teachers were using these tools from multiple locations each requiring multiple student login codes. I liken this use to a group of learners wanting to work with a chef to cook a meal in the kitchen, when the stove is behind a locked door in the basement, the refrigerator behind a locked door in the bedroom, and the microwave locked in the playroom, etc. Imagine having to create a product when your appliances are not in a single, accessible location! With the inclusion of these "appliances," teachers and students can now go to one place to accomplish their creations and meet their needs for learning.

How will Release 9.1 extend learning opportunities for your students?

The addition of mashup capabilities will allow much more inclusion of, and creation of, media materials that add audio, video, search, and creation capabilities within the one authenticated learning environment.

The inclusion of synching capabilities will allow students to monitor and manage communications and work through mobile devices, and engage them wherever they are.

The inclusion of wiki tools will allow collaborative activity that can be evaluated in ways never available to teachers before this tool was created.

All of this means that two kinds of learning opportunities now exist: 1. the extension of existing classrooms, allowing changing practices for both learners and teachers; and 2. the provision of all-online learning opportunities, both formal and informal, that can be guided and managed personally and by mentors/teachers. Release 9.1 allows both to take place now.

What's new and different about Blackboard?

In what ways do you think Blackboard has improved the quality of the product with Release 9.1?

We have been using Release 8 and have not yet upgraded to Release 9. Jumping directly to Release 9.1 accomplishes two purposes for us: It brings the ease of use that was added with Release 9, and it adds some K-12-specific management capabilities that were previously outside the scope of the product. These capabilities make Release 9.1 the first Blackboard version with instructional functionality designed specifically for K-12 use.

How do you think Blackboard views you as a client?

Blackboard has paid close attention to our feedback and input in order to build features that will help K-12 clients positively impact teaching and learning. Since much needs to be done to transform our existing classroom environments, the involvement of client-practitioners in future planning bodes well for a positive and adopted transformation path.

In your experiences in the beta, how do you see Blackboard doing things differently than before?

Our involvement in the beta has been minimal since we (in K-12) do not have the funding, nor the programming departments found in major universities. This means we cannot build a formal beta test project with good reporting back. However, the Blackboard beta team has allowed us to continue with full access to develop and apply the product with real teachers in real settings. This is invaluable to us since it allows us to learn the scope of a transition project we must put into place in order to retrain and migrate our present work to and prepare our people for this new environment. Without this partnership and knowledge, we would be one to two years away from such a transition and in a "follower" role rather than a leadership role.



