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1:1 Valerie Schreiner, VP Product Management / Product Marketing, Blackboard

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I visited with Valerie Schreiner of **Blackboard** at Educause in the fall. Valerie's role in Blackboard's Collaborate division expanded last year, and it appeared to be a good time now to catch up with her and hear how one of the "top tier" providers in education markets — which also sells to corporate customers — is doing.

WR: Valerie, probably a third of our Bulletin readers have heard of Blackboard. Most of that group may also know that Blackboard acquired web conferencing providers **Illuminate** (where you worked previously) and **Wimba** to create a new division, Blackboard Collaborate, back in 2010. How does it benefit Collaborate to be a part of the mother ship Blackboard?

VS: The first value was just the combination of some great product management and development resources when Illuminate and Wimba came together. We were able to take the best of the best to put together a real "dream team" dedicated to building highly usable collaborative capabilities for educators. I am so incredibly thankful to be working with the people I do. They are bar none some of the smartest, most talented, passionate and dedicated people I have ever known! Soon after that, our customers benefitted from the numerous integration points of Blackboard Collaborate within Blackboard Learn. *{Editor note: BB Learn is the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS).}* We work closely with the Blackboard Learn product teams to provide Blackboard Collaborate tools inside the Learn LMS that provide strong pedagogical

value (grading, calendar and group work) and which often cannot be replicated by other providers.

As we move forward, our end users will see more and more advantages as Blackboard Collaborate leverages the expertise of Blackboard Mobile, the mass notification capabilities of Blackboard Connect, and more. Additionally, being a part of the Blackboard family has really helped us "grow up" as an organization. Access to expanded support and infrastructure has allowed us to improve our overall product delivery process, ensuring greater consistency, quality, and documentation.

WR: You've got three key elements comprising the Collaborate platform: web conferencing, Instant Messaging, and Voice Authoring. How do these three capabilities "hook together?"

VS: All three of the elements are tightly integrated into most LMSs to provide role matching and permissions for instructors and students. But each provides a unique value to the educational process. Instant Messaging (IM) supports the ad-hoc style collaboration favored by today's students along with "drop in" style services like office hours and help desks.

Web conferencing provides an optimized venue for more formal instruction and tutoring. Web conferencing also supports authoring and lecture capture style use cases for the institution. The "hook" between the two is that an informal conversation that starts on IM can quickly launch

into a Web conferencing session if more formal tools or a recording is desired. With a single click, the group can move to a virtual “room” without scheduling, inviting or sending links around. It’s really a wonderful seamless experience that mirrors the way students and instructors prefer to work.

Voice Authoring provides another way for instructors and students to engage in more “personal” audio-based interaction, albeit asynchronously.

WR: What’s the mix of deployments of each capability?

VS: Since we’ve become a combined organization and brought the three-capability platform to market, the vast majority of our new customers opt to implement the full breadth of our capabilities. Because we have many legacy customers who started using our technology before the full set of capabilities was available, about half of our customers only have Web conferencing.

WR: I’ve always been interested in how you made IM an option — easily integrated — with web conferencing. When do some universities and colleges go for IM and when do they not? And what does Blackboard do to try to help drive growth in that area?

VS: Instant Messaging is everywhere. But educational customers want to harness the power of presence-based collaboration to help extend student services while reducing costs. Institutions often choose IM in addition to Web conferencing when they want to provide services with specific hours (such as help desk, library, etc.) and leverage presence and queuing. They also choose IM when they want to facilitate unscheduled, real-time collaboration between students and students, students and faculty, and faculty and faculty. Unmanaged contact lists are unwieldy and don’t effectively help students “discover” the appropriate peers or mentors to collaborate with.

BbIM uniquely pre-populates buddy lists containing your classmates and instructors. The LMS integration and the unique help desk capabilities already available support our current growth in IM. As we move forward, we’re working to make the technology even more easily deployable and usable from within other LMSs and on mobile devices as well.

WR: Everybody on the planet at this point is very focused on mobility. What challenges are you facing in supporting mobility?

VS: The challenge for any mobile app provider is in appropriately balancing rich functionality and the limited screen real estate of the mobile device. Web conferencing is an extremely rich application! We think some others have done this poorly by cramming all their capabilities into the phone screen without regard to users’ needs or the ways the native capabilities of the device can best be leveraged.

We’re taking a measured approach, delivering the most important functionality with a strong emphasis on usability, accessibility and user experience. Responses from our iOS clients have shown us that our approach is working. With almost 50,000 iOS users and a very strong app rating, we’re excited to introduce Android availability, along with expanded features on both iOS and Android, later this year.

WR: You reported that from the software release when you added video, you learned you needed to increase the amount of archival storage you provide to customers by a factor of 10x. These days, is that enough? What are your customers saying about this?

VS: For a standard institution, that amount has been plenty. We’ve established a baseline that meets the 80% use case with flexible growth options for the heaviest users. Our enterprise customers receive additional storage as a part of their license for recordings that have been converted to MP3 and MP4 formats for streaming or downloading, especially on mobile devices. For statewide systems or end users who have implementations focused heavily on using Web conferencing to author content for re-use, additional storage and streaming (for standard and converted recordings) is available for a minimal hosting fee. Over time as customers use these tools more and more to author and re-use authored content, we may need to adjust our offerings again. If so, they’ll be sure to let us know!

WR: When you announced echo cancellation at BBWorld last summer “ya coulda heard a pin drop,” then there was a roar of approval. You improved the audio, which was (IMHO) always a weakness with Elluminate and Wimba alike. But you are not done there. What’s the next key area in which you’d like to make technology improvements?

VS: Well, we’d dispute the “always a weakness” statement! The unique ability to provide quality audio that accommodates hundreds of participants without degradation, while also accommodating low bandwidth participants, has actually long been a strength of ours. It has helped us

secure numerous customers who are concerned about their rural end users or those joining from unreliable or inconsistent internet. But certainly the echo cancellation improvement has been incredibly well received.

We are working to expand and extend our support for mobile devices across our platform. We continue to invest in integration improvements and academic workflows, with an emphasis on delivering deeper and more readily accessible reporting and analytics. Customers want more and more information about the effectiveness of the tools they use and as online education grows, so does the need for accountability. We're being asked to deliver all kinds of information related to student attendance and virtual classroom interaction.

We are working closely with our Advisory Council to ensure we deliver what's needed in a readily consumable format to all the interested stakeholders (instructors, instructional designers, administrators, etc.).

WR: BB Collaborate almost "owns" education. Well ok, not really. You compete with **Adobe** (they have big market share as you know in education); **SMART's Bridgit**; **WebEx**, which is initiating a renewed focus on education; **GoToTraining**, which has a deep sales bench; **IBM Sametime**; **Saba** (still out there); **iLinc**, **Microsoft Lync** and others. Where are you feeling competitive pressure and what are you doing about it?

VS: Like any provider, we analyze all of our won — and lost — deals. We win when institutions base their decision on improved outcomes. We lose when institutions are trying to force-fit a meeting tool into the teaching and learning environment. The "focus on education" from corporate meeting providers has been lip service with very little product investment. Not one of those providers has created or supports their own integrations to all the major LMS providers — we do. Any LMS integration they do have is superficial and supported by third parties. This lack of focus means customers are at risk every time their LMS is upgraded. Will their collaborative tools still work? How much will it cost to get a third party to "update" the integration to support the new version?

Those providers also have a weak accessibility story. Educational products need to meet the diverse requirements of all learners — unique learning styles, users with poor internet access, users with disabilities and more.

Over the last few years, we have seen the Adobe presence drop off as they've de-emphasized investment in their synchronous tools in favor of content tools. WebEx has been making some noise and showing up at the right conferences on occasion but we've yet to see anything that gives us pause from the perspective of actually supporting the educational needs that institutions share with us regularly in our Advisory Councils and customer meetings. Both of these providers continue to defer

support of their limited LMS integrations to third parties. There have also been some new "open source, roll your own" products out in the market. While they resonate with some educators, we have found that those products are still relatively incomplete, with limited features, functionality and scalability. We're definitely not coasting and we'll continue to be aggressive with our product plans to stay ahead, but we're confident that we have the best offering in the market today specifically for education.

WR: Not so easy. **Microsoft** is talking a big story with Lync, which fits into a much larger ecosystem of capabilities than does Collaborate. How do you counter the Microsoft story?

VS: Lync fits the needs of educational collaboration in the same way that SharePoint provides Learning or Content Management. Can you use SharePoint as an LMS? Sure, all of the core technology is there and some would claim even more. Is SharePoint optimized for a teacher or student? Absolutely not. Making that tool effective for pedagogy is up to the institution or even the instructor. Lync is the same. It is not an out-of-the-box solution that supports course-based interactions, academic scheduling, assignments, attendance and grading, and group work. Implementing a choice like this comes at a tremendous cost to some of the most-overtaxed people in the educational ecosystem: instructors.

We win when institutions base their decision on improved outcomes. We lose when institutions are trying to force-fit a meeting tool into the teaching and learning environment. The "focus on education" from corporate meeting providers has been lip service with very little product investment.

WR: The lecture capture market has been pretty hot the past few years. Are you looking at it as a parallel market, or are there ways you can go up against the likes of **Sonic Foundry, Echo360, Panopto, Tegrity**, and others in that space?

VS: I think lecture capture is an adjunct market with some overlap to Web conferencing. While both technologies can be used to capture classes, Web conferencing is optimized for online and hybrid interactions. Lecture capture systems are typically optimized for the physical classroom. So while you can use Blackboard Collaborate to capture class lectures, you can't use Panopto to conduct live virtual classes, tutoring or office hours. We have a number of customers who do just that: leverage their "in-place" video infrastructure, capturing class content and interactions with Blackboard Collaborate's recording capabilities, and then make those recordings available in both native and MP4 formats for student review. There's clearly the opportunity for more convergence of these two markets and we plan to continue to enhance and extend our content creation, tagging, distribution, sharing, and re-use capabilities.

WR: About 10% of Blackboard Collaborate's sales are to non-educational enterprises, government in particular. Is this for corporate training, or meetings, or both? And what are you doing to drive business in other markets besides education?

VS: It's really a mix. In markets outside education, our Web conferencing solution is used for meetings AND corporate training. We're successful with clients who are focused on the needs of employees with disabilities, employees who telecommute, employees who work remotely with various speeds of internet access and those that are trying to save on in-person meeting travel costs. For example, one of our clients provides fee-based technical certification training worldwide, with a very large percentage of the attendees joining from Asia.

Another key opportunity for us is whenever the corporate training program is sophisticated enough to use an LMS. In organizations like that, where the same workflows and pedagogy that are important to higher education institutions are important to them, we have a clear advantage over traditional meeting providers.

In an effort to expand our footprint, we have increased our LMS integrations to include systems that are favored by corporate training departments, like Plateau. We've also been able to leverage our Plan capability to help these corporate instructional designers "write once, deliver often" as they create new programs. This ability to pre-create the entire training sequence helps ensure consistent quality and content, which is especially critical with mandated and compliance type training.

WR: What keeps you up at night?

VS: I think the things that keep me up at night are the things that keep our customers up at night. How can we continue to provide cost effective technologies that will help institutions see significantly improved student outcomes as well as reduced costs? How can we support and enable the growing MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) movement in a way that real life interaction with instructors and collaboration between learners is not sacrificed? How can we be a part of helping the "laggards" realize the benefits of online education for their institutions? Online enrollments are growing ten times faster than traditional enrollments. And one of the factors driving this is the need for improved communications, engagement and value for learners, parents, educators and institutions. Blackboard sits at the convergence point. I'm here because I want to see this company and these tools play a defining and driving role in the transformation of education and I really believe we can (and also because it's just a lot more fulfilling than helping a pharmaceutical company hold webinars to expand their market share)!

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