

Let's Talk: A Conversation with Universiteit Antwerpen

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, Filip Seuntjens, Blackboard Project Manager at Universiteit Antwerpen, 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.

Universiteit Antwerpen is currently running Release 9.0 along with Content Management and the Community System. They have been with Blackboard for about nine years, starting with Release 5.5 in 2001. Using Blackboard, the university serves almost 40,000 students in almost exclusively hybrid courses at a traditional campus. They plan to spend this summer training users and hope to go live with Release 9.1 in July 2010.

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?

Even for clients already running Release 9.0, Release 9.1 holds significant improvements. Release 9.1 makes it a lot easier to share content with students and build an interactive and attractive course, using all kinds of multimedia available on the WWW. Technical knowledge is not required and the interface for adding content is even more intuitive than before. The mashups provide easy access to content, and the quick integration of required or optional textbooks is

a plus. Multiple file upload and the enhancements in the question pools are also a bonus for our instructors.

The interface for instructors has become more user-friendly, and it is much easier to publish and re-use content. This results in a significant win for the instructors: a win in time and quality!

From a technical point of view, we are really happy that Release 9.1 runs in a 64-bit environment. As the Blackboard application uses the newest technologies, the application servers get more load than before. A 64-bit environment makes it possible to guarantee high performance with a controllable amount of application servers.



“All the good stuff from 9.0, but even more and even better.”

Filip Seuntjens
Blackboard Project Manager

How do you think Blackboard views you as a client?

I see more attention to client satisfaction and a real listening ear for our specific problems. Blackboard seems to understand that empathy and a good understanding of our specific daily needs is a very important factor for client retention.

This was our first experience in the Beta program, but we were very pleased with the systematic approach and the attention that was paid to all, even minor, comments.

What new capabilities about Release 9.1 are really exciting?

How will the new capabilities in Release 9.1 help foster student engagement?

After the blogs and the journals, the integrated wiki functionality gives Release 9.1 an extra tool to build interactive courses and to raise student participation. Besides this, the possibilities for instructors to easily integrate video, audio, and pictures will make courses much more attractive and dynamic. The integration with Facebook, the Bb toolbar, and Bb Mobile really prove that students don't just connect with Blackboard, but that Blackboard also connects with students.

How will Release 9.1 help support educator efficiency?

As I mentioned above, it becomes really easy to publish and re-use content and questions in one or more courses. Less clicking, more functionality, and an enormous ease of use: that's all our professors want of an IT-product.

Also, we're really happy with the mashups. There is a growing interest with our faculty to integrate web-based content in their courses. Finding good content or digital content is always hard, but the mashups allow for easy integration once you can find it. It's going to make life for professors much easier.

We have worked very intensively with the grade book as well. And, we see that the integration of all functionalities with the grade book is going well. Everything comes together better in Release 9.1—the integration of blogs and journals and discussion forums with the gradebook. Everything seems like one coherent product. This is very important to us.

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

Student retention and activating, student-centered and interconnected learning are some of our goals. The tools that Release 9.1 offers, when used in a proper way, seamlessly integrate with our goals.

How do you think Release 9.1 will extend learning opportunities for your students?

Anytime, anywhere learning, just in time, just for me. Blackboard has the advantage that it integrates the newest technological, pedagogical, and sociological evolutions and functionalities in its application. And, Blackboard does this really fast—too fast some people say. But I don't think you can be fast enough. Release 9.1 seems to hold the perfect combination of 'being on the edge' and stability.

Would you have any words of advice or any insight to offer other institutions that are in your position or on older versions of the Blackboard classic platform?

Yes, you can't compare Release 9.1 to Release 6, Release 7 or even Release 8. If I have any advice to institutions who have to make this step, I'd say don't go for Release 9.0, go for Release 9.1. Because as I mentioned before, Release 9.1 has all the good stuff from 9.0, but more and better, and as far as I can tell, more stable.

Don't be afraid to take this step. It's a huge step to move to Release 9.0 or 9.1, but you have to take it sometime in order to keep up with the newest and the best stuff there is. If I can quote one of our deans, he said in a meeting a week ago "Only the best is good enough for our students." And, right now, that's Release 9.1, so we have to do it.

When going through a migration, you have to know there are a couple of months of hard work and lots of people who don't like changes at all, but if you believe in the product, just move and cope, and keep up with the latest and newest technology and developments. We are not married to Blackboard, and we look at other products in the market and constantly monitor all the evolutions. But according to us, Blackboard is the product that suits our needs and goals best.

Where do you see the future of learning management solutions going, and do you know if the Blackboard technology is keeping pace with the change that is happening and the need that's being created?

If you would have asked me five years ago, I wouldn't have imagined that it would look like Release 9.0 right now, or that we would be planning to do institutional assessment with the Outcomes System. I could never have imagined that five years ago, so if I say something right now, I'm afraid I would be wrong.