

Let's Talk: A Conversation with Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

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, Ira Strauss, Senior Systems Analyst at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, engaged in 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.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University is currently running Release 8.0, though they have a server running Release 9.0 for testing, and they hope to upgrade and go live with Release 9.1 in May 2010. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University has been a Blackboard client since 2000. They started on Blackboard 5.0 and have seen the Blackboard products evolve over the past few years and have a lot of insight and thoughts behind where we are today with Release 9.1. The school runs between 5,000 and 6,000 courses serving over 25,000 active students each month. The school offers undergraduate and graduate courses year round, with residential students taking traditional semester courses, and students in the Worldwide Campus meeting at more than 170 campuses around the world, as well as online learning. They also now have a PhD program as well as students in Europe and soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What's new and different about Blackboard?

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

Working on the beta, it seems like everything is really well thought out. We saw a couple of things in Release 9.0 that we that we weren't sure about or were concerned about, but those have been taken care of in Release 9.1.

Blackboard said they were going to go back to the core product, and I think that has been wise. I think the last year or two Blackboard has been really focused, once they started looking at NG. I think that the technology

is moving forward in a great way. When I walk in to a meeting, they all know it's going be about Blackboard, "Oh, here it comes again." Yet, in the meetings when I show the newest release, people that don't take classes and aren't interested in the LMS are still really excited. They say things like, "Hey, that's really looking good, that's some great stuff." So there is definitely going to be a lot of interest and excitement over what can be done with Release 9.1.

EMBRY-RIDDLE Aeronautical University

"Blackboard Release 9.1 brings about many changes and features that our constituents have been asking about for quite some time."

Ira Strauss
Senior Systems Analyst

How do you get your faculty prepared for each new release?

I'm very pleased with the materials that Blackboard is coming out with—the getting started documents, the flash videos—they are beginning to fill what's been a big void and difficult for us to take care of.

Our ability to produce documentation and make movies has actually slowed down rather than gotten better – we've lost resources. So, Blackboard's coming forward with all these new resources just in time. Communication to stakeholders is really important, and it's great that we'll have all of the Blackboard documentation available through our portal. We're going to have the On-Demand Learning Center pushed up front and center in Blackboard. We're going to use our self help knowledge base to really set up a lot of questions and answers—things like how do I add a grade column, how do I create an assignment, how do I add content? We'll make some quick comments and point to the Blackboard resources from there. So, all of the client tools that Blackboard has developed will save us time and energy, making our jobs easier.

What new capabilities about Release 9.1 are really exciting?

With your history working with previous releases, and from what you've seen of Release 9.1 in the Beta Program, what are some of the key features of Release 9.1 that are getting people really excited?

We are most excited with the move to the drag and drop user interface; that's excellent. Also, some of the new content is going to be exciting. I think probably the biggest thing would be the Mashups or the Wikis.

We're getting ready to go into accreditation, and we have a whole new group working on hybrid course design. They are hoping to bring in hybrid course design as part of what they call the QEP, which stands for Quality Enhancement Plan. So, they are very excited about wikis, for that purpose. Also, content wise, some of the audio and the video and the way those can be easily embedded in a course are going to be lot more exciting than what we've been doing.

How do you see mashups, wikis, and blogs being integrated into the daily teaching experience?

In addition to our web-facilitated worldwide online courses, we have thousands of courses in the residential campus and in the ground centers which are all over the world. We'd really like to move some of those courses to the hybrid setup where instead of meeting three times a week, they meet one time

a week. The whole goal of the hybrid courses is to reduce the amount of time spent on the ground with activities that can be accomplished with an asynchronous type of event online. Instead, when they do meet face-to-face, it becomes a chance to really have a conversation about the course material or have a lab. So, features like wikis and blogs, where the students can be guided by the instructor in their own exploration, and the ability to present to each other through audio or video and make presentations with the mashups from YouTube are all very appealing.

You've obviously seen very different versions come out over the past ten years, so what would you tell another institution that is thinking of upgrading to Release 9.1?

I would tell anybody that was not on Project NG that they really should be looking at making that move. It will take communication and training, but it's going to be a tremendous shift for their faculty in terms of what control they have and what they will be able to do.

I think one of the best aspects of Release 9.1 is the intuitiveness. I've been telling a lot of our faculty and staff that if they just take a minute, they can find anything that you've been using in the past. Don't be concerned that you don't see it right away. If you can get them to open the door and look in, they are going to be really amazed at how easy it is and how intuitive it is, especially things like setting up the course—it's just a blast compared to the past when you had to go to a control panel and click "OK" fifteen times for every single action.

One final thought: where do you see the future of course management technology going and how is Blackboard shaping up to meet those needs?

I think as I mentioned, the biggest thing is that Blackboard maintains the focus on teaching and learning. I know where we're going at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University is Outcomes and the overall institutional assessment. We've got to see more and more tie in between institutional goals and the individual courses. I know the Outcomes team is trying to go that way; it's the next big thing for us. We're bringing Outcomes in for assessment and we're bringing it in for departmental planning and program assessment. For example, we want to be able to go in and judge how all the physics classes are being taught across three campuses. That sort of data collection, we can only do with Outcomes, and we need to keep seeing Outcomes developing. Its ability to get into the courses and the courses' ability to deliver content and results to Outcomes—that's the biggest area for us right now and where I see other institutions headed.