

Let's Talk: A Conversation with The College of St. Scholastica

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, Joel Johnson, Instructional Designer at The College of St. Scholastica, 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.

The College of Saint Scholastica serves 3,700 students, offering bachelor to doctorate degrees with 26 percent of the courses being offered online. There's strong enthusiasm from students all the way up to the board of trustees to make sure that online learning is supported, and they are expecting online enrollments to increase in the coming years. St. Scholastica is currently in a co-production environment with WebCT Version 8 and Blackboard Release 9.0, though right now they're still primarily a WebCT campus. Knowing that Release 9.1 was scheduled to have a much better feature parity from WebCT over to Blackboard, they waited to make the move fully over to Blackboard. They plan to teach all courses in Release 9.1 beginning January of 2011.

What were your first impressions of Release 9.1?

We had high hopes for Release 9.1 because we had heard for quite some time that 9.0 was good but not as good as 9.1 was going to be. So the bar was set high before we had even seen it. And, when we actually had access to it in the Beta Program, we had very high expectations. I would say Release 9.1 met those expectations.

The first impression was very positive. We knew going in that there were going to be some things from WebCT that didn't transfer into Blackboard, so we were prepared for those. But, overall, the first impression was that this is a much better product and this is something that we can more confidently move to.

Some of the features and functions that you're familiar with in WebCT are now built into 9.1. Can you talk a little bit about the learning modules?

Learning modules is a very significant feature. WebCT is designed around learning modules for delivering content, and so we use learning modules very heavily at this college.

The ability to bring those over in a clean and usable manner was important to us, and we saw that was not the case with 9.0. Release 9.1 handles learning modules much better. And, the functionality is quite similar. The adoption of Blackboard Release 9.1, having that feature, should be much higher and much easier.



"Coming from a WebCT environment, Release 9.1 not only has the tools and features we need to migrate our courses, but it also allows us improve our teaching and learning at the same time."

Joel Johnson
Instructional Designer

What do you think of the wikis and the mashups?

We're looking forward to the wikis. That's something that people have been asking about, and we've had to find third party solutions with different levels of success. So, we're happy there's something integrated now that we can take advantage of.

The blogs and the journals are also something that we're very much looking forward to because WebCT has a similar feature built within the discussion forums. So, that has been a very positive change because the blogs and journals are very intuitive.

The Release 9.1 gradebook has some significant improvements over the WebCT gradebook. Our faculty have been asking for certain pieces of functionality, and they will now have what they are asking for. For example, if they want to grade a discussion, right now in WebCT there's no way for them to provide a score and comments back to students in one point of entry. They essentially have to create two columns in the grade book in WebCT, one for the score, one for the comments. In Release 9.1 they won't have to go through these multiple steps. It may seem simple, but to our campus this is going to be a major improvement.

What would you tell other WebCT clients who are thinking of upgrading to Release 9.1? What kind of information would you offer to them or advice would you give to them having had the experience with Release 9.1 so far?

If I had to give advice I would say if you've looked at Release 9.0, make sure you take a close look at Release 9.1 because a lot of what we saw was missing in Release 9.0 is now addressed in Release 9.1. I would say there are a lot of new things that you can look forward to in Blackboard Release 9.1 that weren't available in WebCT.

Overall our institution is gaining much more than we're losing by migrating to Release 9.1. I think the interface is much more attractive and intuitive in Blackboard Learn. It's much more customizable and flexible. It integrates very nicely with the Content System and Community System, so we are using those as well. We're still looking forward to when Blackboard will integrate some additional WebCT functionality like grading rubrics, but we can easily get by with the enhanced grading capabilities we now have.

Where do you see the future of learning management solutions going and is the Blackboard technology keeping pace with the change that is happening?

I think Blackboard has done a good job in setting some trends that might be coming up. We're really excited to see what will happen with the Blackboard Mobile.

And I think the integration of Web 2.0 is a great step. I think we need to see more of that because users are used to dealing with those types of tools on the Web. Student-created content is more than just typing a paper now. They're using a lot more multi-media, and Blackboard needs to be prepared to accept multiple types of files and then make sure that instructors can assess that effectively too.

I think if we're kind of looking at a blue-sky way to make an LMS work, we need to allow people who speak different languages natively to interact seamlessly within a course site so that language would no longer be a barrier. I think that would be a fantastic way to embrace a kind of a global learning environment.

Overall, I've been very encouraged to see that Blackboard is aggressively pursuing some of these newer technologies.