

Let's Talk: Blackboard's Conversation with Dudley College

Over the last several months, our clients have been providing us with invaluable feedback about our newest release, Blackboard Learn™, Release 9.1, and how both our company and our products can improve to better serve the real issues educators face today. We engaged in a conversation with Neil Thomas, Performance Systems Manager at Dudley College, to learn how we are doing when it comes to partnering with our clients and creating a compelling product for the future of teaching and learning.

Dudley College, located in West Midlands, UK, has been running WebCT® software for six years. They are currently on Campus Edition 8. After running Moodle in testing for a short time, the school decided to continue its partnership with Blackboard and invest in Project NG. Upon further investigation they decided to wait for Blackboard Learn, Release 9.1 for a number of features they felt were essential for their success. Using Blackboard® solutions, the college serves 15,000 students in almost exclusively hybrid courses at a traditional campus. They went live with Release 9.1 in production with faculty and staff in April 2010. They plan to spend the spring training instructors and allowing them to augment their converted courses with the new features available in Release 9.1 and will go live with all classes in Release 9.1 starting in August 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?

To me, quality has a lot to do with bugs and stability. Staff members and instructors need to feel reassured that they are using a stable product that won't let them down at a critical point and that the product works in a logical and efficient manner. We have been happy with what we have seen in Release 9.1.

What have your experiences been in working with Blackboard?

We have found working with Blackboard to be very cooperative—we are on the same team. We could not wait to

get our hands on Release 9.1 as we really wanted to meet our very tight deadline of releasing the product to staff when they returned from their Easter break in April. As soon as Release 9.1 was available, we had it installed – in fact I think we were the first in the world to get our hands on it. We backed up our courses on CE8, and the managed hosting team restored them in Release 9.1. We couldn't have done this job so quickly without the first-rate support of the Blackboard Managed Hosting team.

With the knowledge we had from the Beta Program, we already had a list of 'fixes' we would need to do in each course area, and we used a two-week Easter shutdown to prepare all of the migrated courses for release. This meant we were able to meet our deadline of April 19th for getting Release 9.1 to our staff. From that date all staff had access to Release 9.1, and all of their migrated courses were ready for them.



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Neil Thomas,
Performance Systems
Manager at Dudley College



What new capabilities about Blackboard Learn™, Release 9.1 are really exciting?

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

Student engagement is a result of two things: staff buy-in and courses that are built with engaging content. Release 9.1 is easy to use and provides ways to add collaborative tools and valuable web content, so it addresses both aspects of student engagement.

In our WebCT system, we built courses that were predominantly just folders with lists of content in them. If we are honest, many of these were not that engaging for the students. But with Release 9.1, we have the ability to build more exciting pages and more engaging course areas. We can easily embed such things as videos, audio, or mash-ups right onto the page. Many times collaborative tools such as blogs or wikis are considered more advanced tools, and only a few staff really use these features to the fullest. However, in Release 9.1 these tools are so easy to use that I can see more instructors taking advantage of the functionality. Additionally, the drag and drop interface is very appealing to instructors.

How will Release 9.1 help support educator efficiency?

There are some basics of efficiency that are addressed in Release 9.1. File storage is quicker and easier. And, in the area of grading and assessments, there are real efficiencies that can be made—central grading and tracking.

Moving beyond the basics, some of the efficiencies that our instructors are excited about are the mash-ups, being able to quickly integrate engaging content from the web, and the other enhanced collaborative tools, like the gradebook integration from within the wikis. The integration with Safe Assign™ is also very helpful because, unfortunately, plagiarism is something we all deal with.

How will Release 9.1 help your institution reach its overall goals?

We know that when our instructors use the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) effectively, we get good feedback from the students. The students desire the technology in their classes and increasingly see it as an essential part of their studies. So, the more it is used, the better feedback we get, and ultimately we know our students are supported with the best resources to ensure their success in the course.

Would you have any words of advice or any insight to offer other institutions that are looking to upgrade to Release 9.1?

Plan. Plan. Plan. That is the key. Get access to the software so you can see what you will need to do, whether that's course conversion or instructor training. For us, access to the NG Playground and the Beta Program were crucial, especially as we intended to launch with a new product so soon after its release. By participating in the Beta Program, we were allowed to see what we had to do in terms of migration and course design, and we were able to plan appropriately. Because our expectations had been set appropriately, we were able to plan the time and resources to do the tidying required in our courses. Now the instructor training is going really well because we can just show instructors the exciting, new things they can do with Release 9.1 rather than have instructors do the work after the conversion. The more work you can do for the faculty in terms of migrating and preparing their courses, the better.

Also, don't forget about the internal marketing you need to do in order to keep all your stakeholders informed of your upgrade plans. We started our marketing of Release 9.1 in Oct. 2009. We sent teaser e-mails, gave quick video demos, and sent out regular communications of our progress. This allowed us the time to get people excited and prepared for the change.

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 definitely think that Blackboard technology is keeping up with what is needed in the marketplace. We feel very lucky to be able to offer our students the best product that is out there. We looked extensively at Moodle and had it running at our school. However, we know that with Release 9.1, we have all the functionality we need in a product, and we have the support of a company that is partnering with us. For us the challenge now is to work with our staff to ensure everyone is making use of the tools that are available to them to create really engaging courses for our students. I don't see myself knocking on Blackboard's door asking for new features in the near future. Instead we need to focus on broader adoption of the wide range of features we already have with Release 9.1.

Where is the future of the LMS going? I don't know that I can answer that. It is really unbelievable the progress we have made in the past few years. I can't even imagine where we are going next—but I am looking forward to finding out.