Coordinating a Distance Learning Software Rollout with the Needs and Visions of A Mature Test Organization; Political and Technical Lessons Learned

Luke Fernandez, Ph.D, Weber State University

University administrators who are contemplating or presently engaged in rolling out learning management systems (LMSes) face ponderous technological and political logistics. Weber State University is currently one year into its LMS rollout and plans on having the LMS implementation completed by Spring 2005. In most respects, this rollout has been successful and has moved forward relatively smoothly. However, in respect to online assessments, the LMS initiative continues to experience problems. These problems have resulted from incomplete knowledge about assessment needs on the part of the organizations initiating the roll-out, a lack of dialogue between the distance learning organizations and test organizations, and inchoate approaches for achieving consensus on test-related issues.

This presentation elaborates on the problems articulated above, broaches the main questions that should have been tackled by the initiative in order to forward a smoother rollout, and lists some strategies that may be worth implementing in order to build consensus on assessment issues as the rollout moves into its concluding stages. In doing so, it seeks to offer a model for how other institutions may coordinate distance learning software with the needs of a mature test organization.

At Weber State University, over 110,000 departmental tests are delivered each semester through a home-grown, Web-enabled assessment tool. This tool has evolved over the years in close coordination with the expanding needs of Weber's testing centers and faculty. The technologies and organizational structures that deliver departmental testing at Weber State have grown in such close concert that they appear at times almost inextricably attached. The needs of the testing centers are served by the software, and the policies and practices which give expression to a testing center's identity are in turn defined by what the software can and cannot do.

Although this organic relationship has been in place for over five years, it's recently been challenged by Weber State's burgeoning, and very profitable, distance learning organization, which has purchased and begun implementing Vista—WebCT's most advanced distance learning software. The Vista product has a built in assessment tool and the distance learning organization has signaled that its ultimate goal has been to replace the home grown solution with the Vista product in the interest of promoting efficiency, system integration and

standardization. The WebCT product promises to realize many of these goals because:

- it provides easy session and navigational integration across the student portal and all course management tools
- it provides easy data integration with student information systems thereby facilitating enrollment and identity management across semesters
- it provides standardization by dint of the fact that it is a technology that is documented and supported by an established company with a large community of users

Sold and promoted largely on the basis that it was more capable of realizing integration, efficiency and standardization than the technologies that have been around up to now, WebCT promises much and the groups promoting the technology on campus have worked zealously to be the handmaiden to this promise. However, after a year of use, and after more than $350,000 has been expended on training and marketing WebCT on the Weber State campus, a core set of faculty and test administrators are continuing to resist the replacement of the home-grown assessment tool with the WebCT assessment technology. According to these users, the Vista assessment tools

- Are not able to cater to the needs of testing organizations as effectively as to distance learning organizations. In particular, testing organizations that deliver high stakes tests need features that
- Are not unequivocally superior to the assessment technologies it was meant to replace
- Will not necessarily streamline the work processes of every user group who switch to it. In particular, Weber State faculty and testing personnel are accustomed to a group of features which are currently missing from the WebCT product. These features:
  - allow faculty to easily specify that a test is only accessible at designated testing centers
  - prevent test takers from navigating around the Web while taking a test.
  - enable administrators to easily distribute test passwords to authorized proctors

Because so much money has been invested in promoting the WebCT product, and because there is a vociferous contingent of users who resist this promotion, a certain amount of polarization has occurred. It is difficult to establish clarity or consensus on testing issues because the technology is no longer perceived as something that resolves a problem that is common to all. Instead, it is perceived as an initiative that promotes some interests at the expense of others. When the evaluation of technology is colored by interest, as it has been at Weber State, technology assessment, becomes a more challenging task. How, in the face of this challenge, can clarity and consensus be achieved?

A review of the literature suggests that while off-campus parties may cast some light on the controversies that have bedeviled Weber's LMS rollout, there doesn't appear to be a technology or body of technological information that can obviate all political difference. Online testing technology, and its associated literature, is still evolving. At this point in time, it is not so refined that it is capable of anticipating every competing testing need or transcending and eliminating the political controversies that are fueled by these competing needs. However, there are strategies that can mitigate their more invidious effects. These strategies include:

- inviting test directors to be involved in roll-out process
- finding technologies that scale to testing center needs
- finding technologies that ensure the secure delivery of high stakes tests
- developing procedures that can comprehensively identify campus testing needs and the constituencies that are associated with those needs

In retrospect, Weber's rollout would have gone a lot smoother had it taken care to more clearly identify campus-testing needs and the constituencies associated with those needs. Weber's experience suggests that LMS rollouts are facilitated by:

- recognizing the critical role that testing plays in LMS technology
- creating comprehensive lists of campus testing needs
- identifying the constituencies that are associated with those needs
- creating a clear formula for prioritizing those needs

Other institutions are likely to have different combinations of needs and constituencies than Weber State's. However, the strategies for mitigating the political discontent which is generated when needs are left unmet may be something that is not so unique.

The successful rollout of distance learning software depends on informed decision making and consensus building. To forward these ends, LMS roll-out committees should consider very carefully to what extent testing organizations need to be represented in the roll out process. Moreover, LMS rollout committees also need to anticipate the political and technical concerns raised here. Perhaps, in some future iteration, LMS technology will come closer to comprehensively meeting all testing needs on campus. Until that time arrives, administrators may be able to profit from the political and technical strategies that have been elaborated herein.