The Course Website: WebCT or Platform Free?

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The previous two issues of the newsletter presented a model for computer supported learning in which the course website plays a key role in guiding the learning process inside and outside the classroom. Key items of the website were also discussed. This issue focuses on the implementation of a course website.

While innumerable tools are available for developing a website, our discussion will focus on two options that represent the most logical choices for faculty members at AUC. The first option is to use WebCT and the second option is to use generic tools (e.g., Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint) and the free Microsoft program, FrontPage. This is not an either/or decision as a better choice may be to use a combination of the two options. Academic computing services (ACS) can play a key role in supporting both options. ACS has an extensive training program that can get anyone up to speed in any of the listed tools. The Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT), with its Student Technology Assistant (STA) program, may also play a vital role in helping faculty members develop and maintain course websites using either option.

For the WebCT option, one uses the WebCT interface, which requires a special account, to design the various aspects of the course website. WebCT organizes its design tools in various categories related to their applications. For the second option, one creates the various learning materials using the generic Microsoft tools (Word, Excel, and/or PowerPoint) and chooses to save the document as a 'web page' from the file menu. Such a document is ready for use on the Web. FrontPage is used to link the various documents in an organized website.

Generally speaking, and in my opinion, the second option is easier for straightforward course contents including (syllabus, course notes, assignments, message board, old exams and quizzes, useful links, case studies, solved exercises and practice problems, lecture notes, laboratory plans, and project information). On the other hand, WebCT has an edge in communication and evaluation items including discussions, mail, quizzes, and surveys. WebCT also provides good course management tools.

Accordingly, and in my opinion, the best decision is to develop a course website that uses both options described above. My choice is to use generic tools as mush as possible and use WebCT only to fill in any gaps. Currently, I am using WebCT for discussions, surveys and grades. Everything else is done using generic tools. The following WebCT restrictions limit its utility as a stand-alone option:

- As implemented at AUC, access to a particular WebCT course is restricted to students registered in the course. This goes against my belief that knowledge should be accessible to anyone who wants it, including AUC students and any other person around the globe. Contrasting this restriction with MIT's OCW program[*] that received global recognition, leaves one wondering about its logic. In my opinion, password-protected knowledge has no room in an academic environment.
- Related to the problem above is the fact that courses are only active during the semester in which they are offered. If a student needs information from a course that is not offered (e.g., for their senior project), it will not be there. Generic tools allow the instructor full control on activating and removing courses. This semester, I drove a strong message to all students by replacing all courses with a unified page on respecting TAs and lab assistants. It took less than a minute to accomplish this task. It would have been quite difficult to carry out the same task had the courses been on WebCT.

[*] See Vol. 4, No. 7.

- WebCT does not support the CALR philosophy (presented in the two previous issues) except in classes with Internet connections. In contrast, a website developed using generic tools is always available where a computer is available. I carry my website (containing all courses) on flash memory, freeing me of any server or activation policy restrictions.
- Courses developed on WebCT require a WebCT server to run. If one moves to another place that does not subscribe to WebCT, efforts invested in structuring the website are lost. My website evolved over the past few years to a size of about 400 MB covering 13 different courses. It would be a serious problem if all structuring efforts were lost because of platform dependency.

The above listed restrictions drove me away from WebCT for a long time. However, I was lured back by the powerful 'grades' feature of WebCT. The nice thing about grades on WebCT is that they are password protected (it makes sense here). In addition, students can only see their own grades along with optional statistics on the overall class performance for their reference. This feature helps combat the *few* grade bargainers that we have at AUC.

Nevertheless, this nice feature comes at the expense of a very cumbersome interface for grade management. Very simple tasks that can easily be done in any spreadsheet can be quite involved, and sometimes impossible, in WebCT, so much that WebCT provides an option to download and upload grades as a text file for manipulation by a spreadsheet package. Such an option is not user friendly either. This may prove to be a serious problem if an instructor, out of frustration, delegates the task of grades management to a TA. Such a delegation would grant the TA unlimited access to grades. While I trust that most TAs at AUC are professional and ethical people, some are too young and are dealing with students who were, in some cases, their classmates a semester earlier. This may be too much pressure for a young TA to handle, leading to serious academic integrity problems.

By the same talking, instructors should give serious considerations before adding a TA to a WebCT course. Again, while this may relief some of the load of designing and maintaining the website, the TA will have unlimited access to the grades. I have brought this problem to the attention of the concerned ACS staff who promised to look for solutions, but so far, I have not received any answers. I suggested that WebCT should allow an instructor to limit the TA's access to grades, or lock some grades to where they may not be changed except through a password. To the best of my knowledge, these options are still under investigation.

Using generic tools for posting grades requires caution too. Saving an Excel worksheet as a webpage after hiding several columns would result in a file that seems to show the desired columns only. However, in an Explorer browser, the user will have the option to convert the file back to Excel and recover all hidden information. On older browsers, users may be able to copy the file and paste it in Word revealing all hidden columns. One option here is to capture the screen with the desired grades format and then post the grades as a 'jpg' image.

In summary, I recommend that one uses generic tools as much as possible for constructing a course website, especially for items related to the course contents. WebCT may be used for the temporary course items including discussions, surveys, and grades (managed by a patient instructor!). The utility of WebCT may be increased by:
1. Removing the access restriction, or at least making it optional.
2. Improving the grades management interface and allowing better grades control.
3. Providing local servers that would allow instructors to run their courses on any computer without requiring an Internet connection.

Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to aellozy@aucegypt.edu