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Blackboard Inc., Washington, DC; 800-424-9299, ext. 4; www.blackboard.com. ●●●●●

With the strong set of features it developed in its academic implementations, Blackboard 5™, Level One, Release 5.5, is making inroads into the corporate training and education arena. Blackboard is already used at such institutions as Princeton University and Harvard Law School, and its growing list of corporate clients includes Boeing, Bristol-Myers Squibb, and Motorola. We tested Blackboard on Windows NT using Microsoft SQL Server 7, creating five sample courses for a department of 40 employees. The e-learning system also runs on Solaris and Unix and can use Oracle 8i as its database.

Designing a customized look and feel for our courses was simple, thanks to 100 different button styles to choose from. More important, Blackboard's Web-based administration module made publishing course documents—such as handouts, presentations, and assign-

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review Blackboard

ments for students—easy for us. Blackboard supports a variety of file formats, from Microsoft Word documents to PDFs and even video files, although using video presumes a certain amount of bandwidth available to both the server and student.

New in Release 5.5 is the ability to schedule material to reach students at a predetermined date and time, a must for instructors who want to be able to publish coursework in advance. Instructors can now do all their grading online as well. We like the spreadsheet view, which displays all the grades for a class and is exportable to Excel.

Although the online testing module in Blackboard makes designing tests and quizzes straightforward, we found that entering test questions, which requires a considerable amount of data entry into the application's



Web forms, was tedious. You can, however, archive tests and questions for reuse in later courses, and the ability to set up multiple-choice tests that return instant results to the students and teachers is a great feature.

To promote interaction among students and teachers, Blackboard has threaded discussion and chat built in. The tools will be familiar to anyone with a moderate level of Internet experience and are well integrated into the product. Even those students who have little familiarity with them should be able to come up to speed quickly.

In addition to being able to download

materials and assignments, students can manage the whole process directly within the Blackboard window. They can submit work to an instructor via a digital drop box (which stamps files with the time submitted and uploads them to the instructor), check their grades via the My Grades tab, keep track of class events via a calendar, and plan their time with personal to-do lists.—RVD

leaders

- **Blackboard 5, Level One**
Course development and management tools
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applications

E-Learning

If you see a commuter reading “Escrow Essentials” on a Palm on the train tonight, it’s Dan Thoms’s fault. As senior director of education products and services at Mortgage Bankers Association of America (MBAA), which represents the real-estate finance industry, Thoms is in charge of CampusMBA, the distance learning arm of the MBAA. Over 11,000 students are currently taking courses at the site, which offers programs covering all aspects of real estate.

“We’re reaching members where we couldn’t reach them before,” says Thoms. “We’ve more than doubled in courses, customers, and revenue since we launched in September.” CampusMBA offers accredited certification programs, test centers, and real-estate finance publications over the Internet.

A knowledgeable staff is often a business’s most valuable asset. But employees can rarely afford the time for seminars and formalized classes, nor do companies want

Help employees stay knowledgeable through virtual education.

BY RICHARD V. DRAGAN AND MARY BEHR



to absorb the expense. Today, instead of missing work and traveling to a distant site, many employees can get some of that training online. And the return on investment can be dramatic. IBM, for instance, claims it saved \$90 million in travel and training costs in 1999 by moving to e-learning solutions throughout the company.

While business implementations as big as CampusMBA are few, e-learning is taking off. By any estimate, the potential for the e-learning market is huge. IDC says that the U.S. corporate market for e-learning will reach \$11.4 billion by 2003 from \$2.2 billion last year.

A host of companies are vying for a slice of the pie. Last August, Forrester Research identified more than 100 e-learning providers, including established training companies and Internet pure plays, using a variety of strategies to teach online students.

ON WHOSE TIME?

There are two basic modes of e-learning: *synchronous* and *asynchronous*, both of which work in the corporate environment. In asynchronous mode, students take online courses at their own pace, viewing posted lectures and class notes when they have time and getting personal feedback from an instructor. Students communicate with the teacher and each other via chat, e-mail, and threaded discussion groups. The main advantage: Students study at their own speeds, on their own schedules. Typically, the only scheduled events are homework and take-home test deadlines.

With synchronous training, students work in a virtual classroom in real time. This approach demands that an instructor lead the class remotely. Students may watch a live slide show, or in rare instances, they will see the teacher via a Web-based video. Synchronous training often relies on powerful chat tools that let teacher and students interact with each other and engage in private-channel side conversation when individual help is needed, without disrupting the main flow of the class. The advantages are real-time responses from a teacher and a greater sense of belonging to a real class. But synchronous training locks students into the same schedule, which may not work well in the corporate world. For this reason,

asynchronous training has become the more popular approach.

THE ROAD AHEAD

When Gartner recently studied how much students had actually learned, live and virtual classrooms came out about even. But the report noted that students still preferred face

time with live instructors. Video may help bridge this gap: Seeing the teacher present the class could help engage students. Today, though, less than 10 percent of the companies that use e-learning solutions have full-motion video, according to Michael Chasen, CEO of Blackboard, because bandwidth isn't available for their students. ■



E-learning is a true online counterpart to real-world classrooms: Teachers can give students personal feedback, and students can chat

among themselves. Online classes can include posted class notes, lectures in writing or via Webcast, threaded discussions, and quizzes.