First steps: piloting WebCT at WIT

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Introduction

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) currently caters for 6000 full-time and 4500 part-time students. Diversity within the student body has highlighted the need for flexible course delivery. Thus while the traditional face-to-face lecture mode is still the predominant teaching and learning mechanism at WIT, individual commitments mean that not all students can base themselves on campus for the entire academic year: a number of full-time students work many hours during term time, while part-time students are generally fully employed.

In response to this phenomenon, a number of lecturers at WIT have, in recent years, been experimenting with online learning using different commercial web-based systems, their objective being to achieve types of mixed mode delivery programme where lectures are complemented by online elements. Such programmes not only meet student demand for a choice of learning environment, but also surmount geographical barriers, thereby opening up the possibility of new markets: a growing international, postgraduate and potentially lucrative professional sector, for instance. The institute is very much aware of this reality, listing technological awareness as one of the key priority areas in its strategic plan.[1]

Technological strategy

In a bid to recommend a more coordinated e-learning strategy for WIT, a multidisciplinary expert group, composed of various academics, IT, library and administrative staff, all of whom were interested in online learning, was established in 2003. The decision was made to standardise on one proprietary virtual learning environment (VLE) so as to streamline support and service resources across the institute. Following a rigorous trial and tender process, WebCT was chosen as the optimum VLE for WIT.

Certain considerations informed the final choice, not least of which were compatibility and ease of integration with WIT's computer, library and administration systems. WIT specifically wanted a VLE that would, in time, pave the way towards the provision of a managed learning environment (MLE). The implementation programme commenced in November 2003. Projects to date include the establishment of a WebCT Centre at WIT Libraries, the execution of a pilot WebCT Training Programme across all academic schools at WIT and the development of a WebCT support site.

WebCT at WIT

As a starting point for the project, it was agreed that a centralised department be established to coordinate the institute's e-learning strategy. To this end, a WebCT Centre, which incorporates a training and support function, was established in the Luke Wadding Library in November 2003. The library was an obvious choice of venue. It is one of the institute's newest buildings with state-of-the-art facilities and features and with a proven track record in user-education. The Librarian had been involved in the WebCT venture at WIT from its inception and was prepared to release members of the library's learning support team on a part-time basis to advance the project.

The learning support team has been training staff and students in the effective use of library technologies since 1996. In the interim, its staff have gained knowledge of instructional design and curriculum development, effective people skills, awareness of professional development strategies, and of information and communication technologies. The institute's recognition of the team as ideal candidates to pilot WebCT not only expands the library's role in WIT's educational endeavours, but also accords with library policy to promote the use of a range of tools, including WebCT, in the delivery of effective teaching and learning.

'We must see our educational role as not only making faculty aware of and able to use the new technologies that are central to their disciplines, but as including helping the faculty integrate the new information tools into the fabric of the instructional programmes in ways that enhance learning and offer new structures for programme delivery.'[2]

The Centre is currently staffed by three learning support librarians, their remit being to pilot WebCT throughout the academic departments at WIT. This involves providing professional guidance and technological support to lecturing staff, who are interested in using WebCT in their day-to-day teaching, and also includes a substantial pedagogical and administrative element.

Pilot training scheme

The team's first responsibility is to instigate a large scale and varied programme of events, so as to raise awareness and develop skills in web-based learning and teaching. The pilot training scheme, delivered on a school-by-school basis to all academic staff, and tailored to the needs of beginners, is a case in point. Staff attend on a voluntary basis and generally according to school - individuals are more comfortable attending training in a familiar group setting where everyone has similar course concerns and is starting from a common reference point. The programme consists of three half-day 'hands-on' training sessions, the content of which is based on materials that were bought in from the UK Netskills organisation and adopted and adapted according to local needs.

Session one, 'Creating course content in WebCT and course support tools', concentrates on the creation of course content in WebCT, including glossary, references and links to action menu items. The application of such support tools as calendar, discussions, e-mail, chat and whiteboard is also covered.

Session two, 'Student management and assessment', a highly interactive session, explains the principles of self-tests, quizzes, surveys and grading, firstly from a designer and secondly from a student point of view. Administration and student management issues are also discussed.

Session three, 'Practical pedagogy and online course design', is currently in preparation. It will cover such practical issues as how to teach in an online environment and 'how best to design online learning materials and activities which promote active, meaningful learning'[3]. This session will ideally be delivered in collaboration with an expert academic user, someone who has used WebCT to good effect and who can detail and discuss 'real life' pedagogical concerns.

Follow-on support

Training is complemented by a web-based support page, (http://www.wit.ie/library/webct/) which is prominently hosted on the opening screen of the library website and which directly associates WebCT with library learning support initiatives. The page offers academic staff and students further information and advice on using WebCT and is a focal point for supplementary materials and guides, links to additional online resources, FAQs, troubleshooting pages etc. Feedback to date shows this to be an invaluable resource, particularly for those who are interested in concentrating on particular aspects of WebCT. Details of early use, information on building your first online course and tips on how to create online learning materials are for instance available on the site.

Lecturers who have completed the training programme are invited to contact the WebCT team on an individual or group basis for further assistance and advice. The team is committed to working with individuals on identified projects, providing professional guidance and technological support. Follow on tutoring is based on a constructivist 'learning by doing' model: users are asked to identify the skills required, and one-to-one training ensues accordingly.

'The methods of constructivism emphasise students' ability to solve real life, practical problems. The job of the teacher in constructivist models is to arrange for required resources and act as a guide to students while they set their own goals and "teach themselves".'[4]

Course design and development

A series of WebCT templates, each of which includes a set of frequently used tools, have been developed according to school. Tools are grouped within four domains: content, communication, assessment and administration. The templates also include a standardised 'useful resources' section, which includes links to WIT libraries and WebCT support sites. The template structure provides lecturers with a flexible, guiding framework that can be used as a launching pad for the development of individual courses.

Cases in point include the progress made to date with a number of WIT lecturers, all of whom have proven themselves to be keen early adopters of WebCT. A group of nursing tutors have successfully transferred their lecture notes onto WebCT and are currently in the process of creating online assessments based on course content, while a business lecturer is using the discussions tool as a means of communicating with his postgraduate students. Lecturers appreciate the fact that they can use WebCT as a medium to enhance face-to-

face classroom sessions and are also impressed with the increased ability its tools give them to interact with students, track course usage etc. Initial student response is also positive: students are impressed with the flexibility and freedom of choice WebCT affords them.

From the library's point of view, the fact that OLAS, its online information literacy tutorial, has recently been successfully re-compiled in WebCT, and is used as a training template for the development of additional online courses at WIT, paves the way for the future of information literacy at the institute. Library staff are working in close collaboration with a number of lecturers to further develop OLAS within the WebCT framework, with the aim of integrating it into some of the core subject areas in the curriculum by January 2005.

The future
Plans for the immediate future centre on the promotion and development of WebCT throughout WIT: the timetabling of regular training for academic, administration and student groups; and the provision of ongoing support, including out of hours, year- round support for academic users. The project's ultimate aims are the creation of an open learning environment and the seamless integration of WebCT into WIT.

In time, it is envisaged that the school by school roll-out process and the one-one meetings will be supplemented by a measure of devolved support – the development, for instance, of local support units, departmental based mentoring systems, collaboration and mutual support networks among lecturers themselves.

In anticipation of this, the team is actively seeking further means by which lecturers can share their experiences of using WebCT to teach fully online or blended courses with their colleagues. Provision for support and discussion groups is currently being implemented, as is the possibility of hosting an E-Learning event at WIT to inform, educate and inspire academics to take full advantage of the online facilities available to them.

While the team is currently targeting the academic schools, it intends to use the holiday periods to introduce WebCT to a range of support services at WIT, including admissions, examinations, careers, schools liaison and counselling. Were these services available via WebCT, the institute would be one step closer to a managed learning environment. Following this scenario to its limit, students would have a single access point from where to complete all their transactions with WIT, from requesting course information, to registering for courses, to paying fees, to downloading course materials, to receiving exam results, etc.

Conclusion
This is the future, the world that WebCT is signposting WIT towards. For the moment, the WebCT team plans to travel on hopefully in its endeavours to introduce WebCT to the staff and students at WIT and to integrate it, piece by piece, into the mainstream life of the institute.

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