Special Section:
Course Management Systems

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In a surprisingly short time frame, course management systems have become an integral part of the instructional tool kit for many institutions. In its most recent annual survey of technology trends in two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities across the United States, the Campus Computing Project notes that "(a) growing number of campus respondents identify course management systems (CMS) as "very important" in their institutional IT planning (scale score 5.8, [...] scale: 1=not important/7=very important)." (2001) Of the 590 institutions surveyed, "roughly three-fourths (...) have already established a "single product" standard for course management software, up from 57.8 percent in 2000." (2001). This phenomenon is not limited to post-secondary education. A quick review of the conference programs of organizations dedicated to technology use in K-12 education (e.g. the National Educational Computing Conference) shows that commercial course management systems and similar applications are making inroads as well. And major North American corporate players such as Blackboard and WebCT are aggressively promoting their products to educational and business clients in international markets.

True to form, foreign language educators and technologists have often been among the earliest and most extensive users of these systems once they're made available at our institutions. We've put the tools through the paces, finding out what works, what doesn't, and how the features provided can be used most effectively, given their strengths and limitations (which are still considerable). We've explored beyond the basic features used by many to investigate the flexibility of the testing tools and the incorporation of media and non-Western character sets. We've had extensive communications with help desk, tech training and systems administration staff to help shape the configuration of and support for the CMS tools at our institutions. Equally importantly, we've been vocal in providing regular (and often critical) feedback to CMS developers, to remind them of the

instructional applications of their tools (as opposed to entreprise). These cooperative efforts have not only smoothed the path for later adopters at our own institutions; they have also had a positive influence on the development of CMS products.

It is in this spirit of collaboration that we offer this special section. Much has already been written about individual uses of course management systems in language instruction (see In The Professional Literature for selected references). However, the IALL 2001 conference in Houston made it clear that these systems are having a broad impact on how we deliver and support language instruction and that the IALLT membership had further expertise to share about the potential applications for these tools. In addition to the varied and creative instructional applications, many of us are also using these tools for lab management and language program coordination, for example. And here at the Journal, the use of a CMS-based site has dramatically improved the internal exchange of documents and information as we develop each issue.

Therefore we offer you our contribution to the ongoing discussion. We hope you will find this useful, and we encourage you to communicate further with us, the authors of the articles in this section and our colleagues in the language technology listservs to continue the conversation. Course management systems are by no means perfect, but as these authors show, they can be an invaluable tool in supporting language instruction. ◆

References

The Campus Computing Project. *The 2001 Campus Computing Survey.* [cited May 30, 2002]. Available from *http:// www.campuscomputing.net/summaries/2001/index.html.*