

From the Associate Editor

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When everyone can cook, what's a chef to do?

In this issue of the *IALLT Journal*, we look at a phenomenon that is changing the extent to which faculty depends on those of us who are facility directors and instructional technologists. Course management systems, from WebCT to Blackboard to Prometheus and others are popping up in various forms and levels of complexity in many institutions worldwide. These integrated tools allow faculty members and students to create their own Web pages, upload and distribute documents of many types, and create online assessments to check mastery of the materials so delivered. At my home institution, the number of courses using our course management system of choice has jumped from 20 or so three years ago to over 200 courses last semester. Now, it is quite clear that not all faculty are using all of the features supported by the course management system, but there are a few baseline usages that nearly all of them make of the tool.

- Web page development: Course management systems utilize script-driven templates to create HTML documents of varying complexity. All the user need do is enter the data he or she wishes to incorporate in a Web page, click the "Submit" button, and review their handiwork, posted to a Web page within their course.
- Communications: Course management systems offer a variety of communications options between the instructor and his or her students—group and individual e-mail distribution, various forms of synchronous chat, and threaded asynchronous discussion.
- Document distribution: Instructors can upload numerous "document" formats to their accounts within the course management system, including embedded audio and video files. These become available for download or playback within the context of the course.

Online assessments: Course management tools make it relatively easy for faculty to create interactive assessments incorporating media and a question/response format that varies from multiple choice to short answer. Many course management tools link these assessments to a gradebook feature within the online course.

Looking over these benefits and features to course management systems, two immediate reactions come to mind – one is, of course, “This is wonderful. Now I won’t have to spend time and energy I don’t have helping my colleagues make Web pages or work with authoring tools such as Hot Potatoes or HyperStudio, nor will I have to negotiate with my networking group to set up listservs and newsgroups for each course that requests one.” The second reaction is, of course, “Once faculty members can do all of these things themselves, how does my role in faculty development change? Once they’ve mastered the course management tool, what’s going to motivate them to explore beyond the boundaries of the system? If they’re all (or mostly) capable of technological self-sufficiency at a functional level, what do they need me for?”

Before declaring auto-obsolence, I think there are some possibilities to be considered – for those of us who serve as liaisons between our Information Services administration and our faculty colleagues, there is still much to be done. Keeping lines of communication open between the two entities is vital to the continued successful use of technology in language instruction. We can model best practices for our colleagues – if we have teaching responsibilities – piloting courses that use technology effectively. We can explore technologies that stand outside the course management system, and offer them to our colleagues, hopefully provoking them to think of other, perhaps more flexible, ways to achieve the results they’re seeking.

Course management systems are a wonderful tool for many – particularly “second-wave” users of the type that Edwina Spodark discusses in her article in this issue. We should be mindful, though, that they are simply a tool, and that our students’ learning needs may not be addressed fully by this particular tool. Mark Twain, as usual, said it best: “If your only tool is a hammer, all problems look like nails.” Our most effective role in the deployment and use of course management tools may be that of informed critic and guide. ♦