

Using WebCT as a Language Lab Management Tool

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Introduction

Under duress. That is how I describe my adoption of WebCT. The IITS (Information and Instructional Technology) labs at the University of Rhode Island (URI) had been early adopters of WebCT courseware and my boss wanted to expand WebCT to the LLRC and other specialty labs on campus. Being naturally pigheaded, I didn't see how WebCT would improve my operation. After all, the DeskTop labs managed over 150 student employees working in a variety of locations and I had only 15 students in one location. The IITS Labs used WebCT to manage information flow through both the chat feature and the white board. I could just walk into the lab and tell the shift what needed to be done. The IITS labs used WebCT for access to time cards—my students had their timecards neatly indexed in a binder I collected every two weeks (and no one lost their timecards or turned them in late). The IITS labs used WebCT to promulgate changes to the schedule, request shift changes and post information about equipment repairs. If my communications and operations model functioned effectively, why did I need WebCT?

I began the series of mandated WebCT training with significant misgivings. I sat down at the first session with my fingers on the keyboard and my mind closed. First, we created a simple home page for WebCT. Ok, I thought, at least WebCT is sort of fun. The instructor showed us how students would access materials and WebCT features through this home page. We added students (by global id) and learned how to enable student self-registration. I downloaded a background from the web and made a glitzy looking page. I walked away from that first session feeling artistically fulfilled but still not convinced I needed the courseware to help me manage the lab.

At the start of the second session, we saw how students actually used WebCT in the IITS labs: How they logged on,

what information they used most, what they did with the information. I was most impressed with the Communications features of WebCT. In the "Discussions" area (a bulletin board feature), students and staff posted important updates. Eureka! I found a small morsel of motivation. Here was a way to say something once and make sure everyone heard (read) it. I could even check in the Designer View and see if anyone hadn't been reading the postings.

That small morsel was the beginning of a revolution in the way I managed information and student workers. But the epiphany only happened when I stopped thinking in terms of what other people did with WebCT and began to imagine what I needed it to do for the Language Lab. Over the course of the summer of 2000, I built the Independence Hall Multimedia Facilities (IHMF) WebCT site. (There was so much information the students needed beyond the LLRC that I named the site for the building we are housed in.)

By the Fall, the returning students experienced some culture shock. "You mean we have to do what?" was a frequent comment. But use it they did. WebCT became part of their routine because the site was a portal to a rich information experience. Any information they needed to perform their job was posted or linked to the WebCT site.

Four semesters later, the WebCT site has become a de facto first step when checking in for a shift. Important information (like a reminder that timecards are due) is always on the home page. Do all the students use it equally? No. Some students check it even when not at work, some students check it once a week. Anyone who routinely doesn't check WebCT, gets a friendly nudge from their team leader. And, so far, the one or two students who did not become part of the WebCT culture were lackluster employees in other areas and did not stay with the Language Lab for long.

About the Site

WebCT has many functions that lend themselves to lab management and some that don't. I don't use the quiz feature—I think the test bank concept is cumbersome. I don't use the chat room (the student workers are in the same room, why chat?). I don't use the Whiteboard—we have one in the lab. The features I have had success with include:

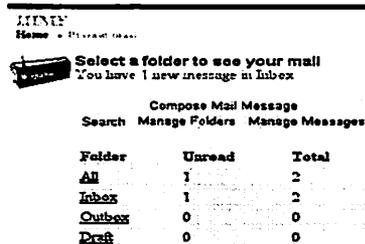
Discussions

Called "forums" at my site. We can all post information

about changing materials, equipment problems, or requests for shift substitutes. I created a discussion topic for "just students" to promote interpersonal communication. I created a discussion topic to post jokes to give the students another incentive to visit. This is clearly the most used feature—269 postings so far this semester.

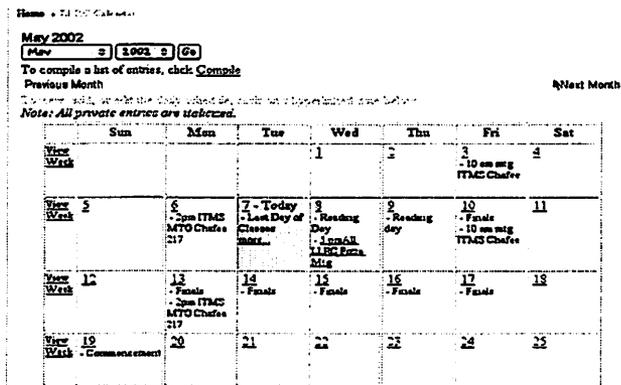
Private Mail

It is easy for the students to forward WebCT mail to their regular e-mail accounts. Thus they don't need to be in WebCT to receive. We all use this feature to e-mail each other with important information and never have to remember an e-mail address! Just pull down the browse menu and select from the list of students enrolled.



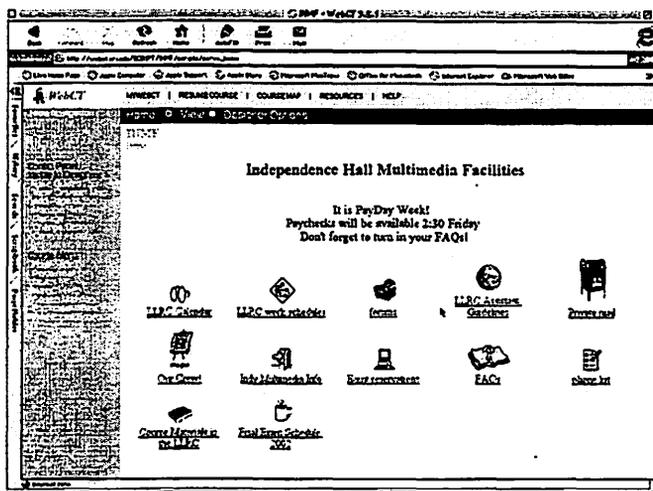
Calendar

Before the start of every semester, I enter all the relevant academic calendar dates as well as mandatory training times and team leader meetings. I also use the calendar to post birthdays and special events (one of our students became a U.S. citizen recently). Students can post their own entries (they appear in italics and only within their own WebCT view).



HomePage

I edit the upper text block on the home page to reflect when timecards are due and what time checks can be picked up. I have more than a handful of icons/links and I wonder if I should simplify the page. But that would create more layers to wade through. I don't know if that would be an improvement.



Other Features

Non-WebCT specific features I have incorporated successfully:

Our crew -- a photo gallery of the student staff. If a new employee forgets a name they can duck to a computer in the back of the lab and check out the site. Because the site is password protected, the students have no qualms about having their photos posted.

Course Materials – A listing (in HTML) of what materials are being used by what courses and their location (Virtual Language Lab or in the “actual” lab). This is constantly shifting information and I keep it on a Web page on a different server where the faculty can check to see if it is accurate.

Work Schedules – A simple HTML table showing the current schedule. I also post the finals/reading days schedule a few weeks before so students can sign up for any open hours.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
8	Ti-Anna Meghan	Melissa	Ti-Anna Meghan	Melissa Andy K
9	Ti-Anna	Melissa (to 9:30) Meghan	Ti-Anna	Meghan Andy K
10	Ti-Anna Meghan	Meghan	Ti-Anna Meghan	Meghan Andy K
11	Ti-Anna Lauren	Tika Christina	Ti-Anna Lauren	Tika Christina
12	Lauren Tim	Tika Christina	Lauren Tara	Tika Christina
1	Tim John	Tara Christina	Tara Tim	Tara Christina
2	Andy John	Tara Christina	Tara Tim	Tara Christina
3	John Tika	Tara Christina	Lauren Tika	Tara Christina

Phone list – the phone numbers and e-mail listings of all the lab workers. Again, it is password protected so the students don't mind the information being posted.

FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) – Another HTML page. I compile these questions semi-annually from student submissions. At the end of every semester, I trade the last paycheck for five FAQs. A student has yet to balk about my strong-arm tactics.

Equipment Reservations – A link to the Web site where faculty can reserve equipment. It also has equipment information and check-out policies.

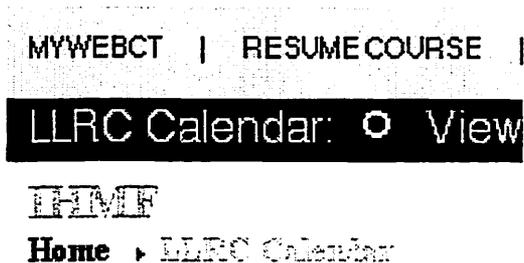
One of the best features of WebCT is not any one page or tool. The "My WebCT" page lists what is new at the site since the last visit, so the students know whether to look at their private mail, discussions or the calendar. Ingenious!

Helpful Hints for WebCT

- If you have a Web site outside WebCT use the "Add a Single Page or URL" function to bring that site into WebCT. Many of my links actually go to the URI web server. Earlier versions of WebCT had many steps in the upload process, so I put the pages on the web server and created links. With the recent improvements in

WebCT uploading is much easier.

- Use the “breadcrumbs” feature instead of the browser back button. You can jump around the Web site much more quickly (the breadcrumbs are the path names at the upper left of the browser window).



- When you first get started, use the “Designer Map” function (under in the navigator side bar). The Designer Map provides an easy navigation tool to locate where you add students, add communication tools, or manage files. You don’t have to know it all to get started.
- Put only the most used functions in the Navigator side bar. Too many and it becomes cluttered.
- Keep the number of links on the home page to what can be seen without scrolling. If students don’t see a link immediately, they will forget it is there.
- Stick with one theme of icons (blue, brown) if you import pictures from other Web sources keep them the same size. Otherwise your site looks inconsistent.
- Make the calendar function as useful as possible and let students post privately. (Only the designer posts publicly.)
- If you use it and keep it current, it will be useful. A WebCT site is not something you can ignore even for a few weeks.

Getting Started

Some basic guidelines for starting a site include:

1. Build it and they will not necessarily use it. It has to be relevant and helpful.
2. Make it easy to update (that is why I kept so many pages on the web server).
3. Make it easy for the students to find what they need. Think about what they need and don't bury it in too many layers.
4. Don't recreate the wheel—create links instead of duplicating data that is already on the web.
5. Give the students incentive to use it: jokes, a bulletin board for socializing, and links to useful information on and off the job (i.e., any new campus policies).

In the final analysis, my boss was right. WebCT enhanced the way I manage student workers: the Language Lab operates more efficiently, the students have more information at their fingertips, and I have an always-open channel to pass along important data or comments. WebCT has revolutionized the information flow from worker to supervisor and supervisor to worker. A major part of the improvement is that the students get the information when they are ready to deal with it. Four semesters later, I am not just a convert—I have become a prophet of WebCT. But, I also sheepishly have to admit that my students still use the pre-printed timecards in the lab notebook. ♦

Mary Fetherston runs the Language Learning Resource Center at the University of Rhode Island.

