



Self-paced Student Tutorial in the WebCT Environment

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ABSTRACT

This poster session will provide an overview of a newly developed, and still evolving, web-based, interactive tutorial designed to expedite the learning curve for students required to interact with course materials within the WebCT[®] environment.

Keywords

Tutorial, online learning environment, WebCT

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, faculty at the University of Maryland have been trained to use WebCT[1] (an on-line learning environment) as an adjunct to their teaching. More than 400 courses will make use of some feature provided within WebCT in Fall 2000, including calendars, bulletin boards, chat rooms, file transfer mechanisms, student collaboration and webpage space, on-line quizzing and grade display.

2. THE CHALLENGE

Courses currently using components of WebCT span a wide range of disciplines and students in those courses bring with them a similarly broad range of computer skills. A primary concern for faculty and students experiencing teaching and learning in on-line environments such as WebCT is that the tool not drive the progress of the course and that it not be a divisive factor in student success in mastering course content. Additionally, faculty do not want to waste precious in-class or on-line contact hours on teaching students how to use WebCT's tools.

3. AN ONLINE TUTORIAL IS BORN

In response to the diverse skill levels and learning needs of the student population, the University of Maryland's Technology

Enhanced Learning (TEL) group has developed a tutorial within the WebCT environment itself. It leads students through uses of the various tools available via a series of interactive exercises. Students can survey the entire environment, or just those tools they will be required to use in a specific class.

Prior to the creation of the web-based tutorial, OIT-TEL had provided two other training resources for students. A printed primer provided directions on how to use all of WebCT's bells and whistles and, in fact, served as the framework on which the online tutorial was built. Its shortcoming was that it was primarily a user's guide and provided no interactive exercises with which students could "test" their mastery of the content.

The OIT Peer Training program offered a two-hour, instructor-led survey course in which eight significant features of the environment were introduced in a hands-on demonstration format. The course was offered several times at the start of the semester and many faculty required their students to attend. The course responded to faculty concerns that they not have to take class time to teach their students how to use the technology. However, for many students the instructor-led approach failed in one of two ways. Most faculty do not use all of the tools available in WebCT; yet, the course surveyed a significant proportion of the tools. Students found it frustrating to have to sit through demonstrations on tools their own faculty would not require them to use. Additionally, many students adapted easily to the on-line environment and resented being required to sit through two hours of training, in the evening, on tools they could learn on their own (perhaps with the aid of the printed user's guide).

The interactive, web-based tutorial is meant to complement the training needs of students. It does not replace the user's guide, nor will the instructor-led training option disappear in the near future. (As an aside, it is interesting to note that the instructor-led training received uniformly favorable reviews from those in the returning student/graduate student demographic. Those who provided less favorable feedback in class "exit" surveys were mostly in the underclassman [freshmen and sophomores] category. Tutorial developers believe that these same students will adapt most readily to, and get the most benefit from, the interactive, self-paced tutorial.) Just as student computer skill levels are varied, so are their learning styles. The interactive tutorial will appeal to those students who are self-motivated, comfortable in the web environment, and a bit adventurous.

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3.1 Advantages of the Interactive Tutorial

The advantages of the WebCT tutorial are that it is self-paced, it can be surveyed in random order, and it can be accessed from any networked computer anywhere in the world at any time. In fact, its first significant user group will be students enrolled in a Life Sciences distance learning post-graduate certification program set to begin in September, 2000. The students in this program will log into the WebCT course environment from locations as far away as Japan. All of the courses in the program will be taught exclusively in the WebCT course space with some parts conducted synchronously and others affording asynchronous interaction with course material. Graduate students enrolled in the program will be provided with WebCT accounts and access to the interactive tutorial.

The value of the interactive tutorial is that students can proceed through its content in any order that addresses the requirements of their class. Each tool is discussed separately, so students can pick

and choose randomly, as needed, throughout the semester. Each selection provides a description of the tool, interactive exercises to acquire hands-on experience, and (still under development) self assessment quizzes to determine student mastery of specific skills.

4. THE POSTER SESSION

The poster session will provide a tour through significant features of the tutorial. Preliminary user feedback should also be available at this time and may serve as an additional point of discussion. For a complete tour through the tutorial, visit:

<http://www.courses.umd.edu/public/WCTLEARN/index.html>

5. REFERENCES

- [1] WebCT.com (<http://www.webct.com>)