WebCT: Implementation Plan and Considerations
Kevin Kvalvik, December 2002

The significant outlay that course management tools require of any institution may be seen as yet another mandated expense, or "the cost of doing business." Yet, if a robust platform is adopted and then implemented aggressively and uniformly (with the critical faculty/administration/staff-stakeholder coordination), then this acquisition may be seen as a significant perquisite in several ways:

1. A selling feature for promotion and recruitment.
2. An aesthetic addition to the institution's digital presence for alumni recognition.
3. An important tool for in-house data gathering and current statistics for everything from grades to instructor methodology.
4. A vital artifact of future accreditation efforts.
5. An indicator for ongoing grant pursuits that the institution is future directed.
6. A needed tool for faculty for communication, productivity uses, and presentation.
7. The primary medium to enhance or revolutionize the distance education efforts in the Region and beyond.
8. A crucial symbol of ongoing relevance in the rapidly changing technological/higher-ed landscape.
9. An indicator that the institution is minimally meeting the new status quo, and maximally leading area institutions in modeling a new pedagogy combined with a valid foundation and history.

In short, this is a required component in higher education, and if exploited properly, may be a catalyst for growth and change within an institution. This is a boon to those educators who are already straining to meet the new needs of students who arrive at the institution with certain expectations, if not demands, for a technologically-rich environment. Those instructors whose discipline or

content area does not lend itself to all of the affordances of a modern courseware tool will still be able to avail themselves of the entry-level uses of the on-line syllabus, global calendaring, and grade book features. As students inquire and research Western it should be readily apparent that this is not merely window dressing, but that it is a fundamental part of how this small, modern campus goes about its business. For distance educators this will prove a serious resource and challenge: as they must become familiar with yet another medium to create their new product, and they must also go about reworking the courses that they will have already have generated and adapt those to this technology. For this reason the migration of these courses should be defined as intentional, supported and long-term.

As the new requisites are piled on the many users (faculty, administration, staff and students), it is vital that this be done systematically, thoroughly and in the most efficient fashion possible so that the benefits will clearly outweigh the costs. A strategy and timeline for implementation should take into consideration that use will vary within field and intention. This implies that although the presentation tools may complement a standard lecture course, they will have different uses in a course in, say, glassblowing. The amount of actual resources that must be posted for a fiction class that meets three times a week will necessarily vary from a distance course that meets online only, and then in asynchronous fashion. There is a curve wherein certain instructors will be obligated to apply themselves vigorously to the training and use of the tool while others will find the use of tool less radical a shift in their teacher/student interaction. Yet, it is important to note that, regardless of the subject matter, the distance courses are and will remain vastly more labor intensive when it comes to all components of this instrument.

Year one will require a large amount of attention to the hardware itself and the initial software installation and training for the technical staff to become thoroughly aware of the features and "bugs" that are part of any sophisticated piece of tech. It is also in this first year when the committees must be formed to discuss variations on the *default package*, how much this will vary by field and

instructor and what the commonalties must be in course design to give each area--both supplemental and distance—an attractive, user friendly, Western-University look and feel: which components are standard, and which are required, and which are redundant or superfluous. During this first year the ITS staff will discover which areas are already provided for adequately by existing services, such as Banner or on-line mail systems, and which services may be offered, supplemented or subsumed by the WebCT suite. In as much as this will be undertaken during year one, this does reflect a continual, ongoing task of ITS, and courseware technicians, and other committees involved.

Self-selected early faculty adopters will be solicited to begin a beta group who will be using the system with the expectation of challenge and who will be co-problem solvers as they initiate the various affordances. Only when the system's abilities and inherent weaknesses are fully documented and researched should the team begin the comprehensive induction of the balance of the faculty and other administrative users. This instruction will precede only briefly the instruction of the student body. It is unreasonable to expect the faculty to be immediately capable of informing the student body of the interface and answering the FAQ's that this will illicit. Training will have to be conducted for both faculty and students comprehensively.

For faculty the learning curve often seems to have a different look depending on comfort and experience. Generally, regardless of age or field, the breakdown for the target audience breaks into several discrete groups:

1. Those who are technically savvy and have already acquired both basic skill sets and the problem solving confidence to bring to the new task. They need little more than a push in the right direction.
2. The majority are usually those who will need to be a.) told, then b.) shown, then c.) allowed to practice. I have found that this is most effective when repeated more than twice to allow increased comfort with the technology.

The variations are there but it implies that learning this is not a *one-time* event, but a *process* to even become a beginner.

3. Those who do not have sufficient confidence, need, or motivation to master the technology on most any level. This implies that there are those who are bordering on phobic, or those who are not sold on the technology meeting any specific need, or those who are approaching retirement or have some other compelling disincentive.

With this continuum of learners in mind the general introduction to some basic tools may begin in several group sessions. But the ongoing training is best done one on one by the professional development staff. Although there are models for student workers assisting with this faculty development effort, it must be taken into consideration that the interface may belie that what is most important is pedagogy and correct instruction. Student workers may not be up to this more important task. Secondly there is an awareness of institution design and branding that must be reinforced from the initial adoption, or it will result in time-consuming reworking of product after the fact. There is some national precedent for these student-as-tutor efforts and they often create less a professional-development, and more of gun-for-hire, atmosphere: the faculty member does not do the work, but gives directions to the student, rather than acquiring this important technology skill. Lastly, many faculty will be vastly more comfortable working with a trained professional than one of the students that they see every day.

The second year will require a special effort to assist initial training sets. The WebCT package is as useful or as benign as the person who puts it to use. Western has faculty who instruct many different courses each semester, and these often change by the semester and the year. With the variety of subjects and courses the resource-building labor may well be a profound disincentive even to those who are willing. The best way to offset this is with meaningful, informed, just-in-time support, coupled with dependable tools to use. The second year will require a huge emphasis in this entry-level instruction. The type of tools that are available include many that will be created in an ongoing fashion over

the course of the year. On the complex side this may include online quizzes, and resources to download and read online, and presentation materials, and threaded discussions, and calendaring, and, of course, grade book records. This plethora of possibilities will not be done by a professor in the course of one afternoon or day of instruction. At some level this is like starting a career with an empty file cabinet and a blank chalk board.

This will require the **third year** to be the institutionalization year, while instructors begin to have built a reservoir of the basics and may begin creating more assessment tools that automatically post to the grade book and other more sophisticated affordances. Those who have enjoyed some success will have two or more semesters behind them and the new hires will find themselves in a community that will begin to see these tools as the norm that they represent. This will also be a year during which those who have not embraced the technological affordances may begin to get the serious and extended assistance that they will require before they will proceed.

During these years the basic program will improve. To date these improvements have been incremental and have allowed for relatively painless upgrading and allow resource migration from year to year. As new features become available the aegis will be on ITS and the instructional technologists to remain fully up to date. Regardless, it does seem that upon the third year and moving into the fourth the best practices for these tools will begin to become evident for both faculty and student users.

In conclusion of this overview I would like to emphasize the importance of the distance education component of this program. This will increase as it is clear that the instruction offered is relevant, that the pedagogy is sound and that the method of delivery is appropriate. Regardless of how well it is packaged, (and this is critical in of itself) it will only be successful if it is aggressively marketed and recruitment takes on the additional role of advertising what we do face-to-face and what we do online, and all the distance in between.