

# **The Viability and Limitations of WebCt for the Delivery of a Behaviorally Oriented Management Internet Class**

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## **Abstract**

Distance education has become a fairly common method of delivery for university programs throughout the United States. One popular software program, WebCT, is used at more than 2300 institutions of higher education in 77 different countries. This paper looks at the application of WebCt to one MBA level course, and some of the pluses and minuses of using this software package. The author describes ways in which the design of the global course actually encouraged student participation on case studies and film clips, but fell short in the execution of simulations.

## **Background**

Distance education has become a fairly common method of delivery for university programs throughout the United States. The Internet has allowed students to earn a degree from a university in a different city, different state or even in a different country. Software programs that are specifically tailored to Internet learning have been developed and are routinely upgraded based on user feedback. One popular software program, WebCT, is used at more than 2300 institutions of higher education in 77 different countries. WebCt was utilized by the author to deliver a very experientially based, required course in the MBA program at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). Because FGCU offers an Internet MBA, it is necessary to have all required courses, and an adequate number of elective courses, available 100% on-line. The course, **Global Organization Issues**, is highly interactive and process-oriented with objectives that focus on preparing students for global and cross-cultural management. One desired outcome is to move students away from an ethnocentric perspective through the use of simulations and experiential exercises to affect changes in attitudes and behaviors. WebCT software allows the professor (as the designer) to establish an integrated training site that includes training modules, chat rooms, bulletin boards, homepages, drop boxes for assignments, presentation capabilities, and a viewable grade book for students. The professor now has the ability to allow students to sign into just one location as if the students were showing up each week for class. The WebCt site becomes their classroom. There are instructions and tutorials available to walk students through each of their assignments.

## **Course Observations**

WebCT has many useful features for the delivery of an Internet course. On the homepage for the course the professor can display links to a welcome letter, the course learning modules, communication tools, course grades, presentations and announcements.

The announcements feature allows tips for the day to pop up when the student logs on, providing the instructor with a way to post urgent notices or reminders that will be read by the student. The course grades function allows the instructor to establish a grade book containing all of the assignments for the course and their weighted values along with each student enrolled in the course. Students always have the option of working ahead of time to submit an assignment if they will be out of town (one student completed all of her assignments early, including her portion of the group project, because she knew that the delivery date for her baby was in the middle of the semester). Another important case for using the time limitations relates to the group work that is needed to complete assignments. Some assignments are to be submitted by the individual student for an individual grade, while other assignments are to be discussed as a group and, after reaching consensus, the group as a whole posts its answers. The WebCt software allows assignments to be submitted through a drop box, where they are privately seen by the professor, or posted on the bulletin board for everyone to see.

Even at a distance, it is important for students to learn to work as a team. In fact, organizations are requiring employees to spend less time at airports and more time at their computers in an effort to become more efficient and to avoid many of the problems that are endemic in air travel today. Consequently, developing communication skills utilizing synchronous and asynchronous technology is an important part of preparing students for today's business world. This part of an Internet course becomes a very valuable learning tool for a cross-cultural course. Students learn that chat rooms, conference boards and e-mail are not as rich as face-to-face communication. If it is possible to commit tremendous cultural taboos face-to-face, it is even more likely to happen over the Internet where we lack the visual markers (such facial gestures) to let us know that we need to clarify our meanings. I set up duplicate chat rooms and private conferences on O'Reilly Web Board that provided greater stability, however, most groups established their own chat rooms on other Internet servers, such MSN and the use of Instant Messaging.

The WebCT software has features that allow the delivery of distance courses with great flexibility. The viability of this delivery method is its ability to provide access to information and multiple types of databases and files with attachments and all the bells and whistles. Teaching the course via WebCT on the Internet, however, meant that I needed to prepare everything months in advance. The initial planning evolved over a couple of years, and the first distance delivery was a combination of on-campus and Internet modules to accommodate the experiential learning that we organizational behaviorist types seem to favor. The limitations of the WebCT approach for the delivery of behaviorally oriented management classes rest in the lack of face-to-face interactions. While both my on-campus and WebCt classes were required to prepare a group project on preparing employees to do business in another culture, the on-campus classes are able to do more hands-on training. Both groups write papers investigating a series of cultural variables: economic, cultural, political, ethical, etc. They also design home pages for their countries and use the information to assist them in training the rest of the class. On-campus we are treated to foods and artifacts from different countries. We have even had a group of Columbian-American children perform folk dances. Students get totally immersed in that culture for an evening. The WebCT groups "present" their training through the home page and answer questions in both synchronous and asynchronous

discussions. WebCt allows students to view all of the countries and visit linked web sites, but it doesn't leave the same impression on the visitors as the in-class training. The investigating groups learn the same content whether it is Internet or face-to-face, however, the retention would seem to be greater on campus because those groups are rehearsing their training modules and training others.

## **Conclusions**

In summarizing the viability and limitations of WebCt for the delivery of behaviorally oriented management courses, I would point to the positive aspects of the software in terms of providing a way of navigating through the site and its capabilities of including all of the media and assignments that would be utilized over a semester in a face-to-face delivery method. The Internet mode of delivery demands participation by all of the students in the class and limits domination by just a few students. Students can work at any location with Internet access and they can post their work 24/7.

I was successful in having teams establish their own times and methods for within team consultation. They used e-mails, postings in private bulletin boards, conference calls, and chat rooms. They developed a collegiality and team spirit that helped them forge norms to complete assignments effectively and efficiently. However the level of student-to-student interaction was lower via the Internet, and these students expressed that they missed the human contact. While Internet students can learn the concepts and introspectively focus on ideal behavior in cross-cultural management, they lose the immediacy and dynamism that occurs in the classroom.