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Blackboard Teaching and Learning Conference 2010

by Leo Havemann and Mimi Weiss Johnson

There was an air of expectation at the opening of the Blackboard Learning and Teaching Conference 2010. Attendees (mostly from the UK and elsewhere in Europe) gathered in a very sunny Swansea for the first viewing of Blackboard release 9.1. All parties hoped that this release would provide both new functionality and improved stability.

The conference offered an interesting variety of topics from both technological and pedagogical angles, including contributions from delegates on the interesting and effective uses they make of Blackboard in its many current flavours. At its core though, this conference was a tale of two releases. Blackboard representatives were keen to address the community's criticisms of release 9.0 and showcase their new and improved product, release 9.1.

Ray Henderson (President, Blackboard Learn) kicked off the conference by addressing the negative perception of release 9.0, specifically mentioning some of the issues that were discussed at the Durham Blackboard Users' conference in January. He assured us that Blackboard have listened and made changes to the company as well as the product, with more of the development resources now focusing on bug fixing. Ray then unveiled release 9.1 which appears to have some really useful new features, including learning modules, easy-embedding of rich media content, improved file management, a brand new wiki tool, an improved grade center, and potential for SMS integration.

Ray mentioned that one of the stated objectives of 9.1 was to increase appeal to the CE/Vista community, who have thus far been less willing to upgrade, or rather, migrate. A targeted session on upgrade preparation was provided for this group. There is definitely an increasing sense that the two product strands (Classic and CE/Vista) are coming closer together. Nonetheless, it still seems this release will appeal more to Classic users. Some of 9.1's selling points in terms of functionality, such as the learning modules and file manager, are already present in Vista and CE.

Vista and CE users were also told that they would face some issues if they migrated existing courses/sections to Blackboard 9.1, including the inability to change icons at the section level, the disconnection of migrated Powerlink items (such as Turnitin), and the fact that migrated HTML documents cannot be edited in Blackboard 9.1. Blackboard are looking into resolving these issues in future releases. Blackboard's honesty about these issues was appreciated, but many in the CE/Vista community questioned whether an upgrade would be beneficial at this time.

A very significant development regarding 9.1 is that Blackboard believe this release has made great strides in addressing accessibility for the visually impaired; this has won them a gold medal from the National Federation for the Blind in the U.S. This is encouraging news and it would have been useful if there had been more said about the medal selection process, or ideally, an accessibility training session offered.

As well as sessions focusing on aspects of Blackboard itself, various sponsored breakout sessions were offered, highlighting the VLE extendibility that Blackboard integrations can offer. This is a key

area of interest to the community and perhaps there could have been more of these sessions (for example, from Echo360, Panopto, or Learning Objects) as it was quite difficult to find gaps in the programme to visit the exhibition area and chat to the sponsors. It may also have been worth revisiting some of Blackboard's own tools such as SafeAssign.

Unsurprisingly, Twitter formed a key feature of the conference experience for attendees. Tweets bearing the conference hashtag #BbTLC10 came thick and fast, forming a useful summary of key points and posing interesting questions during the sessions. It was unfortunate that the volume of twitter activity did not seem to have been anticipated by Blackboard, and there was a missed opportunity to create an enhanced sense of collaboration and dialogue. Tweets were not displayed as an official 'back channel' during sessions, nor even during the closing remarks of the conference when it was noted that there had been much twittering.

In general the buzz about 9.1 seemed positive and this set the tone for an enjoyable and productive conference. While BbTLC10 enabled attendees to gain a sense of the future of Blackboard, even more importantly, we were able to engage with developments in the present. It was refreshing, and more concretely useful, to learn about the new available release rather than a future one, and it is clear that 9.1 offers improvements for many users, and the promise of better to come.

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