

Spring 2004 ACS Technology Proposal:

Becoming Educated about "Edutools" :

Applications for Learning Management System in the Liberal Arts & Sciences

Romi L. Burks

Assistant Professor, Southwestern University

1. Background:

In a digital age, one almost cannot avoid some integration of technology into their pedagogical thinking. One-on-one meetings with students are now augmented by answering questions over e-mail. The need for students to engage the most research primary materials sends them to the library where they increasingly access digital resources. To be realistic, most of our students now do not remember "studying" without a computer. Therefore, taking advantage of these already acquired skills to encourage students to access and think about material outside of class seems a natural extension of learning. Requiring more of students outside of class frees up class time for more meaningful discussions with peers and faculty.

For many faculty (myself included), the learning curve that can accompany use of a complex multi-functional learning management system (e.g. WebCT) defeats the time saved and learning outcomes realized with integrating technology into the classroom. Using technology in the classroom is not for everyone and it is certainly a faculty member's choice as to the pedagogy that he/she employs. The utility is determined by the costs/benefits derived by delivering the functions - and only those functions - that the faculty member thinks would improve the learning process of his/her students.

Different disciplines or varied student composition of classes also require different tools when applying technology to classroom endeavors. For 1st year science students, frequent quizzing is often necessary to encourage students to keep up with the material. At the senior level, students should no longer require daily connections but instead could spend the semester building a case study project that could be disseminated between courses, or better yet, institutions. Therefore, one learning management system is unlikely to fit the mold of every faculty member unless it contains every function imaginable. Unfortunately, when this occurs, the function of interest gets buried among tons of other unnecessary functions, sometimes along with a hefty price tag.

Therefore, any information that could be gathered about the different options available regarding learning management systems would apply to the ACS community of schools.

2. Description:

In the Spring of 2004, I propose to evaluate the utility of different learning management systems by using the information compiled at www.edutools.info, the collective experience of faculty at ACS institutions and the familiarity of the ACS Technology Center. With a strong, liberal arts background (B.A. English), advanced scientific trainings (Ph.D. Biology), and a natural interest in learning strategies, I think that I can effectively learn about what types of tools would be most appropriate for different disciplines. Using volunteers groups from both a non-majors class (Environmental Science) as well as an upper-level Biology Course (Invertebrate Zoology), I will be able to test the applicability of

different functions in disseminating information to students as well as retrieving information from them.

Over next Spring, I propose to accomplish the following:

- Detailed exploration of the Edutools website (www.edutools.com) to develop a database on the different learning management systems available. These will include open source code to the platform programs like WebCT and Blackboard.
 - Edutools (supported by William and Flora Hewitt Foundation) is a powerful site built to assist faculty in exploring the diverse world of available course management systems. The site allows you to step through a number of processes to consider all the aspects of a course management system and you can sort compare and contrast by product name and well as features.
- Consultation with ACS Faculty regarding both potential uses of learning management systems as well as experience. Based on my past position as Faculty Fellow at Rhodes College and my prior contacts within the ACS Teaching Green Workshop, I will concentrate my efforts on contacting faculty from 5 ACS institutions besides Southwestern (Rhodes, Hendrix, Sewanee, Furman, and Rollins).
- Consultation with The ACS Technology staff (specifically Dr. Rebecca Davis) for a demonstration of the inter-campus course delivery system and an inquiry into its applicability for faculty across disciplines. In addition, Rebecca can also likely connect me with other faculty that have demonstrated an interest in incorporating technology into their teaching practices and curriculum
- After the potential products are identified from either research with Edutools, conversations with ACS faculty or Technical Staff, I will try out the 3-4 most promising prospects for application in both humanities and science curricula.

3. Timeline:

- January: Spend a minimum of 2 hours/week exploring utility of different programs using the Edutools website.
- February/March: Develop brief questionnaire about technological uses in a discipline. Send out e-mails and make phone calls to fellow ACS faculty.
- April: Decide what products to review and make arrangements to do so.
- May: Construct website/flow chart relating research on applying specific learning management systems to meet discipline needs. Write final report.

4. Technology:

No "other" technology is currently required but a desktop machine (which I have) to evaluate the different programs. The Information Technology Department at SU is committed to enhancing technology in classrooms and can likely assist in evaluating some of the resources.

5. Other Institutional Support: I undertake this activity with the support of my Department Chair and Provost. The Biology Department will absorb the costs of any long-distance phone calls to ACS institutions. My main emphasis in my 1st year as a faculty member is to get my teaching to be the best that it can be. Thus, I see my time spent with this project as directly related to improving my own pedagogical skills.

6. Learning Outcomes:

- A website where ACS faculty can go to contrast learning management systems which will ultimately include a flow-chart that gives faculty choices of what resources that they might use and what is the best option.
- An informal comparison of the technological requirements
 - across disciplines
 - across student groups
- Increasing awareness about how decisions are made about incorporating technology into a classroom
- Evaluation of ACS course-delivery inter-campus system for local use

7. Curriculum: Through this project, I hope to discover an appropriate learning management system to use in my own courses (current & future). Through my continued course development, I will be increasing my use of technology as a pedagogical tool.

8-9. Assessment/Dissemination:

As I proceed through the project, I will post my progress/results on a webpage located at www.southwestern.edu/~burksr (personally maintained). In terms of assessment, I will use volunteer groups to examine the learning management systems and evaluate their reaction quantitatively with a survey. By using the resources of the ACS Technology Center, I will also compile a database of the options used at 6 ACS institutions and contact information. Finally, the end project report and compiled flowchart will be made available for broad dissemination throughout the ACS community.

10. Scholar-in-Residence:

As part of evaluating different options, I will seek out discussions with Rebecca Davis (Instructional Technology Specialist). However, at this time, I do not see the need for office space, etc...

Conclusion:

Teaching with technology saves time, but also takes time. I am willing to invest my time to discover the most appropriate means of teaching my students. I recognize the importance of being able to “tailor” the technology to meet the needs of the user. Both current and future faculty could benefit from the information I garner during this project.

Respectively submitted.

Romi L. Burks, Assistant Professor of Biology
 Southwestern University
 Georgetown, TX 78626
 (512) 863-1280 (o) or x1640 (lab)
 FAX: (512) 863-1696
burksr@southwestern.edu