Centra - One Semester Later

It was the printing press that provided the technology to make possible that anywhere- anytime learning tool, the course textbook. I think that fact is important in any discussion of the new “blended” model of education, which proposes that in the future it will be common for courses to have both distance and place-centered components. Considering the fact that textbooks are most often used outside of the classroom, an argument could be made that the blended model was already in use in the 16th Century!

The synchronous, live components of teaching and learning are another matter, where some on our campus maintain that face to face is the preferred interactive presentation methodology. I admit to holding that position myself. However, there are others who also argue that there are no reasonable alternatives to face-to-face instruction. This, in my view, is becoming a more and more difficult position to maintain. I base this conclusion in part on the experiences that I, along with others, have had with “Centra” course presentation software.

The University of Missouri has chosen Centra as its standard. Today, a student, or I if otherwise unable to get to class, sitting in front of a desktop computer can fully participate in a class in progress, at least to the extent that course material is presented on the screen in one of our stick rooms. Centra also allows the instructor to record the class for students to review at a later time. Of course the process can go the other way. On occasion, an instructor must be away from the class period, with a substitute instructor available to give a presentation during the regular class period, with a substitute instructor available for questions.

Centra has only been in use for a little more than a semester but there are already some intriguing anecdotes to report. The most interesting involves an instructor who is teaching two sections of the same course, one using Centra and one not using it. Apparently students in the non-Centra section have learned that the Centra section lectures are recorded as study aids. They are asking to be given access to these recordings as study aids.

This semester I am using Centra in Computer Science 5890. All but one of the students are from UM – St. Louis and attend class regularly. The other student is from UM – Kansas City and attends through a Centra session window (with web interface) which allows him to see the material that is being presented as well as hear my lecture and ask questions. Perhaps it is because he is a graduate student, but the feedback that I have gotten to date is all positive. Moreover, the St. Louis students seem to be taking advantage of the extra resources that Centra makes available. A number of them have told me that they have found it useful to replay and review all or parts of my lectures after class.

One additional point, some of the material that I am presenting is mathematical in nature. This has not been a problem. I prepare this material using Scientific Notebook 5.0 from MackAchnan Software. The mathematical notation in WebPages produced by this software is very readable. We do not expect Centra to be adopted as widely and as quickly as was MyGateway (Blackboard Inc.). That being said, it seems prudent for the University to prepare for a not so distant time when Centra, MyGateway, textbooks, and face-to-face presentations are all tools that an instructor will use at appropriate times to teach, to provide study aids, and to involve students in new ways in learning the course content.

To learn more about Centra or to schedule a demonstration for your unit, contact our Centra Workgroup at: centra@umsl.edu

Jarrod Siegel,
Associate Vice Chancellor for Information Technology
New Single Sign On (SSO) Web Site Features
During the past year, Information Technology Services has redesigned the Single Sign On (SSO) web site, which is located at https://sso.umsl.edu, and has added some new function-ality to help users better manage their accounts. Faculty, staff and students are still able to look up their SSO ID and change their password, but now they can also reset their password by going to the “Forget Your Password?” link. This new service allows a user to have a SSO (single sign on) ID and password. If you are not sure what your SSO ID is, visit: http://sso.umsl.edu/.

Mathematica in Labs and Classrooms
Instructional Computing has installed Mathematica in the laboratories and in the classrooms for the winter 2004 semester. Mathematica will be available for use as soon as the license agreement arrives. In the next few weeks. Instructional Computing will continue to have Mathematica, Maple, and Matlab available through fall 2004 semester.

At the end of the fall 2004 semester we will be asking your input as to which of these applications to continue to support in 2005. The intent of this project will be to set a standard for support to eliminate redundant costs associated with multiple applications that may serve the same purpose. Instructional Computing will institute a similar pro-cess for several additional software packages over the next year. Details on other targeted applications will be provided in future months.

Wireless Connectivity Expanded
Wireless Internet connectivity (Wi-Fi) on campus has continued to be expanded over the past few months. New wireless access points have been added, including Marillac Hall (Ground Floor), and classrooms G00B and S00B, also, the University Center (Room 154) and Ward E. Barnes Library. All open or common areas in the Millennium Student Center (MSC) should also have wireless connectivity by the first of February. For a complete list of wireless access points, as well as how to connect using Wi-Fi visit: http://www.umsl.edu/technology/wireless/

To find out about other changes or news please visit us on the web: http://www.umsl.edu/technology/instructionalcomputing

Chris Schwartz
Superintendent - Instructional Computing

HELP WITH MYGATEWAY AND WEB RESOURCES

WORKSHOPS OFFERING FACULTY, TEACHING Assistants, and STAFF THE OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE HANDS-ON ASSISTANCE WITH THE MYGATEWAY COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM WILL BE HELD THROUGHOUT THE WINTER SEMESTER ON WDAYS FROM 1:00-2:00 PM AND FROM 4:00-5:00 PM. ONE-ON-ONE HELP SESSIONS CAN BE ARRANGED BY CONTACTING ROSS K. FINE, WORKSHOP DIRECTOR AT 314-516-7742. ADDITIONAL HELP IS AVAILABLE AT THE FACULTY RESOURCE CENTERS (SRCs) FOR EACH COLLEGE AND The Thomas Jefferson Library Computer Lab or TLC and 100 MSC.

Robert D. Kiel, MYGATEWAY COORDINATOR

Norton Anti-Virus for Home Use
Students may download the software from the Thomas Jefferson Library Computer Lab or TLC and copy it to disk. Please be sure to bring a formatted writable CD (CD-R) to make your copy as CD’s are not available in the labs. Due to license agreements, only one copy or down- load is available per user. Please use the following link to access our Software Distribution site.

http://tomskawywe.umsl.edu/webapps/software_distribution/login.cfm

For questions, please contact the Technology Support Center at 516-4044

Steve Wilms
Database Programmer/Analyst