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A Bridge Between Blackboard and Open Source?

Blackboard, the dominant player in course management software, has the ability to inspire devotion and, for the more fervid open-source adherents, not a little contempt. So today's announcement may cause a stir among those more apt to liken Blackboard to the devil than a gentle giant: The company is partnering with Syracuse University to develop a way to integrate Blackboard with Sakai, one of the primary open-source alternatives.

Whether the announcement — made at the Blackboard Developers Conference in advance of the BbWorld '08 gathering of higher education technology professionals this week — will inspire mostly knee-jerk opposition, cautious optimism or a warm embrace from the open-source community isn't yet clear. But at least initially, there's bound to be some friction from some corners of the developer community.

"I know that there will be some people in the [open-source] community in general who believe, rightly or wrongly, that Blackboard's statements about interoperability and openness are a veneer that they're trying to paint.... You'll see some of that reaction from people out there that don't like Blackboard," said Michael Korcuska, executive director of the Sakai Foundation.

The partnership with Syracuse, a Blackboard client, reflects the many ways the university's professors use Sakai. As an example, some professors use the software's e-portfolio capabilities on top of or separately from Blackboard.

Once the project is completed late this year or early next year, the company hopes it will have created a platform that any campus can adopt to import Sakai data into Blackboard or vice versa. The solution, which is being developed in-house at Syracuse with support from Blackboard, will be released as a "Building Block," or software plug-in, that will itself be open source.

"In a case like ours where we have a lot of both [systems], it makes sense to do what we can to help make these applications work together," said Christopher Finkle, a spokesman at the university for information technology and services. He added, "Our big rationale for this is focused on our desire to increase the ability of Blackboard and Sakai in working together to help our faculty and by extension our students and their learning environment."

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The announcement comes as part of an increased effort at Blackboard to reach out to proponents of open-source software who have in the past bristled at the company's tactics or its proprietary, license-based model. In addition to the Sakai partnership, the company is pursuing a similar arrangement with another university to develop integration with another open-source course management system, Moodle.

"Students should not have to worry about whether different technology is powering their online learning environments for different classes," said Michael L. Chasen, Blackboard's president and CEO, in a prepared statement. "With a single login users should have access to all of their courses and course material. There should be one place they can go to get all of their course information."

The plug-in, dubbed the Blackboard-Sakai Connector, is planned as part of Project NG (for "Next Generation"), the company's "multi-year, multi-release" initiative to develop an reinvented, fully integrated system. The Sakai project will build on Learning Environment Connector, a platform intended to smooth the integration of data from external course management software that's part of Blackboard Learning System's version 8.

"Imagine a world where students go to a single URL and connect to their course regardless of which course management system it is hosted on. Dashboards consolidate information for users from these many systems. Administrators easily access accounts and information across these systems; thus simplifying helpdesk operations. The Learning Environment Connector makes this world possible," wrote John Fontaine, Blackboard's senior director of engineering, in a company blog post last month (before Syracuse was announced as the partner institution).

Fontaine added in an interview that the impetus for the project was "community-driven" — it bubbled up from customers who wanted to preserve students' and faculty members' ability to decide what system works best for a given purpose. At the Sakai conference in Paris two weeks ago, he said, the response to Blackboard's plans "was actually mostly positive."

"There's been some concern in the [open-source] community that this is a giant attempt to suck everything into Blackboard.... It really is done in the spirit of trying to be an open company, [to] really focus on something that will add value to the student experience," Fontaine said.

At least one of Sakai's founding creators sees the potential advantages of Blackboard's new openness toward open source. Charles Severance, the former executive director who resigned a year ago, said he sees this as a step in a positive direction, even if Blackboard doesn't fully meet the demands of the community.

"Sakai has a sense of freedom, not necessarily something to compete against Blackboard," he said, stressing that his views don't represent those of Sakai. "I look at this new Blackboard activity as something that's a very exciting development, and I think it's a positive development with some caveats."

"The fact that Blackboard sees that open-source engagement ... is important to them, is exciting to me. Instead of sort of just fighting open source, they're going to engage in open source. I think Blackboard potentially has much to bring to open source," he

continued. For example, he said, "I have for a long time dreamed of a way to put Sakai capabilities in the hands of every student and teacher without Sakai having to force campuses to convert to Sakai."

Severance shared a common worry among open-source developers — that Blackboard was more interested in bringing in Sakai data than allowing users to export Blackboard data to other systems. "The bad bit is that it's hard to understand really what open source is until you've done it for a while. And I hope that Blackboard understands open source and approaches it correctly. So for example, if Blackboard comes up with a way to plug Sakai into Blackboard and pull Sakai data into Blackboard but doesn't allow Sakai to pull that same data into itself using those same mechanisms, then that's sort of like, not really open."

But Fontaine said that wouldn't be the case. He said the connector would be "bi-directional," giving users the ability to make a "mash-up" of data from different software systems.

— Andy Guess