How Do Courseware Products Differ on Accessibility?

Courseware products such as Blackboard, WebCT, eCollege, and ToolBook allow instructors to provide online courses within the context of a consistent standard interface. One accessibility benefit of courseware is that many students with disabilities have the greatest success in accessing web content when it is presented using a consistent layout. If an educational institution standardizes on a particular courseware package, students at that institution will likely encounter the same online course interface for many of their classes throughout their academic career. However, these same courseware packages have historically presented access challenges to people with disabilities. Most major vendors, however, have made significant improvements in the accessibility of their products, particularly for screen reader users. For example, the standard interface for most products now includes alternate text on all graphics, meaningful titles on all frames, and tables and forms that are structured according to standard web accessibility techniques.

However, the accessibility of the standard courseware interface is only part of the solution. Courseware products actually provide a delivery system for content developed using other tools. The course developer therefore must assume responsibility for ensuring that course content (including web pages and other documents, videos, slide shows, and other materials) is accessible.

Despite the overall accessibility of their standard interfaces, most courseware products do have some accessibility problems with their optional features. Chat rooms, for example, are difficult if not impossible for many users with disabilities to access. With the Blackboard Learning
System Release 6, Blackboard has redesigned its chat tool using the Java Accessibility API to add keyboard shortcuts and better support to screen readers. Blackboard has developed tutorials that describe specific steps for accessing this and other features using screen readers. Screen reader tutorials have been written for Blackboard Learning System Release 6 (http://www.blackboard.com/docs/screen_reader_tutorial_release_6.htm) and Release 5.5 (http://www.blackboard.com/docs/ScreenReaderTutorial.htm). eCollege has also attempted to address chat accessibility by providing a chat feature that can be accessed either through a Java applet or a text-based HTML interface, the latter of which is typically more accessible for screen reader users. Regardless of improvements on accessibility, the real-time nature of chat will always make this communication tool inaccessible to students whose input methods are slow. For example, a person who types very slowly or takes a long time to compose thoughts may not be able to fully participate in a rapid chat conversation. More information about chat accessibility can be found in the AccessIT Knowledge Base article Are chat rooms accessible to people with disabilities? (http://www.washington.edu/accessit/articles?64)

Accessibility problems are also present in many products' assessment tools. Although instructors are able to upload images when constructing their assessment instruments, they may be unable to add alternate text to these images. Also, many students with disabilities qualify for extended time on tests as a standard accommodation. Courseware assessment tools often allow instructors to adjust time limits for a class, but not for individual students within the class.

Current information about the accessibility of individual courseware products can be found on the vendors' websites. The following are the accessibility pages for four of the more popular packages:

- **Blackboard** (http://www.blackboard.com/products/access/index.htm)
- **WebCT** (http://www.webct.com/products/viewpage?name=products_accessibility)
- **eCollege** (http://www.ecollege.com/products/tech_acs.learn)