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Article abstract

The basic form of online conferencing is asynchronous and text-based, and a vast array of products is now available for fully featured communication within this framework. The following set of seven reviews contrasts some of the best text-based products that have so far come to our attention, with other products whose features are less extensive. This comparison of products provides a useful look at the options now available to the designers of online conferences, and at the choices to be made in product selection. The reviews (by the first two authors, both DE graduate students) have stressed the utility of the products from the joint perspective of students and teachers.

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Technical Evaluations Report

3. Text-Based Conferencing Products

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Abstract

The basic form of online conferencing is asynchronous and text-based, and a vast array of products is now available for fully featured communication within this framework. The following set of seven reviews contrasts some of the best text-based products that have so far come to our attention, with other products whose features are less extensive. This comparison of products provides a useful look at the options now available to the designers of online conferences, and at the choices to be made in product selection. The reviews (by the first two authors, both DE graduate students) have stressed the utility of the products from the joint perspective of students and teachers.

Trials of Free Products

Five online conferencing applications were reviewed (September to December 2001) in their most up-to-date versions. Emphasis was placed upon whether or not each provided the collaborative features found to be useful by the needs assessment study (Report 2 in this series).

1. ***Anyboard:*** is forum software that meets all basic requirements for distance students. It has s easy to set up forums, and several optional features that enhance its usefulness for distance-based students. The software has the best facility for back up and archiving and forums of the products so far tested. Administrator and moderator features are robust. We found the user interface to be a rather cumbersome; but it should be noted that it can be modified by the administrator to be made user-friendly. The packages provide the unusual ability to import and export user descriptions from/to a database. Robust administration features provide the ability to: ban specific users, email and IP addresses; edit, move, and delete messages and threads; customise numerous bulletin board features; set up polls for forum, categories, and threads; archive, backup and restore forums and threads; copy messages from one topic to another (useful if a message is posted under the wrong heading); set a limit to the number of posts by the same person; and freeze the forum after a specific date.

2. ***Beseen:*** While probably not useful for classes of distance students, small groups may find this bulletin board adequate for project work. It is easy to set up and use, but lacks educationally useful features (e.g., the ability to search for and spell-check messages, and to compile transcripts). There is a limit to the number of concurrent messages that can be displayed (75), after which old messages are deleted when new ones are posted. Bulletin-

board messages are limited to eight kilobytes and messages can be stored for 60 days only (there is no apparent way to archive messages).

3. ***Ceilidh*:** is available as both freeware and in the more fully featured Pro version. It meets most of the basic requirements for distance students. The product's moderate range of features includes: editing and deletion of own postings; attachment of files (if permitted by the administrator; email notification of new postings; and auto-create hyperlinks for Web addresses. The product does not include a message search feature, and requires the download and installation of a small operations program.

4. ***Discus:*** (free and Professional versions). This product has the unusual feature of proprietary coding allowing users to add html-style formatting (e.g., technical symbols) to postings. Distance-based mathematics students might find this feature significant. Other useful features include: an integrated chat facility for real time (text based) interaction; private messages; deletion of messages after posting; optional email posting and email notification of replies; easy attachment of files to postings, with variable file-size limits. The package includes a wide variety of administration features similar to those of the *Anyboard* package, plus multiple language support, and a batch user-list upload feature. The *Discus Pro* package (currently $150 US) provides: analysis of user statistics; banning of postings by IP address; reading restricted by IP; forum administration by email; archiving of forums by date and length; private topics; allow attachment uploads; editing of own posts; customisation of preferences; creation of own account; validation of email addresses; cookie-based log-in option; and a spellchecker. The product has limited threading options, and required downloading of a small program and access to server space and CGI privileges.

5. ***World Crossing:*** This Web-based service is very tidy and easy to use. New messages are clearly marked, and the user can choose to read the new messages only without having to scroll through all of the topics to find them. As with several of the forum software packages tested, *World Crossing* has a free integrated text chat feature which distance students may find useful for real-time communication. Other useful features include: a choice of applet-based and HTML/ javascript integrated chat facilities for real time (text based) interaction; a customisable spell checker; optional email forwarding from the *World Crossing* forum site, variable display of discussion items (e.g., alphabetical order; oldest/newest postings first; most recently active first); auto-creation of hyperlinks for Web addresses; forum creation in Spanish. In addition to the usual administration features, the product provides a wide range of display configurations; enabling of NNTP (newsreader) access; and options for the administrator to define user access levels as: participant (read and reply); moderated (posted only after moderator approves the message); read only; and no access. During several tests of the product, the pages were very slow loading (even using a T1 connection). *World Crossing* does not allow saving and/or archiving of discussions, though is otherwise the best free software that we have so far evaluated.

Trials of Priced Products

Two priced applications were reviewed (September to December 2001) in their most up-to-date versions. Although they are not freeware, they are included in this report owing to their high educational cost-effectiveness.

1. ***Aimoo*:** provides numerous tools of use to distance students: e.g., an integrated chat facility; a restricted set of editing tools (so that users can easily format postings to include bullets, email links, Web links, etc., without the need for html coding skills); integration with common Instant Messaging tools (including *ICQ*, *AOL*, *MSN*, and *Yahoo*); a spell checker; customisation of personal preferences; private message transmission; bookmarking of specific forums and threads; and multiple language support. Robust moderator and administrator features are provided: e.g., editing, moving, deleting of messages and threads; customisation of bulletin board options and themes; creation of polls for forum, categories, and threads; option of anonymous logins; and a full range of user banning options. (Current cost: US $15 for 6 months).

2. ***Ezboard:*** We rated this the best of all the products in this comparison, with the most user-friendly and intuitive interface, and meeting all basic requirements for distance students, and more – e.g., an integrated chat facility for real time (text based) interaction; integration with common Instant Messaging tools (including *ICQ* and *Yahoo Messenger*); a spell checker; customisation of preferences, including a public profile; private email messages; email notification of replies; optional view of new messages only; choice of standard html proprietary coding for text formatting (including addition of email links, images and standard text formats); auto-creation (i.e., no need for html code) of hyperlinks for Web addresses; and multiple language support. The moderator and administrator features are very robust, including: a full range of broadband capabilities; editing, moving, deletion, and closing of messages and topics; customisation of numerous bulletin board options and themes; creation of polls for forum, categories, and threads; password protection of forums; and the ability to screen postings. (Current cost: US $30 for six months).

Conclusions

While the *Ezboard* package contains the most sophisticated selection of text-based forum features in this set of products, the *World Crossing* service also provides an excellent array of options, and has the advantage of being cost-free. On the other hand, free services that make use of a proprietary external server (e.g., *World Crossing* and *Discus*) lack the advantage of full stand-alone independence. If the master server used by a product ceases to operate, the product's utility is diminished, and a replacement product may be required. This can involve the users in a disruptive and inconvenient re-learning process. Course designers are therefore advised to make a careful investment in a reliable, independent product for the long term. These product reviews illustrate the many features that course designers can look for in their inspection of alternative conferencing software.

The next report in this series will review Internet audio communication products.

N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses become outdated, online references are not cited in these summary reports. They are available, together with updates to the current report, at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/. Italicised product names in this report can be assumed to be registered trademarks.

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