E-Collaboration Using Centra Symposium

Overview –
The goal of this interactive session is to present the various features and functions of the Centra Symposium collaboration software (version 6). Centra Symposium provides a live, web-based environment that can support instruction, presentations, and meetings. This full-featured tool includes: two-way voice chat, presentation slide display, web site viewing, a polling/assessment feature to gather feedback from participants, the ability to share computer applications, as well as the ability to record sessions for later playback to accommodate those people for whom time constraints prevent their attendance at a live event. Symposium is ideal for highly interactive team collaboration, virtual classrooms, and hands-on training applications. This session is appropriate for persons involved in e-learning initiatives or collaborative projects that are in the beginning stages of evaluating collaboration software, as well as those who have used other similar software packages that would like to explore this option.

Background -
Lehigh University is a primarily residential, private, undergraduate institution that is composed of 4000 undergraduates and 2000 graduate students across four colleges: Arts & Sciences, Engineering, Business & Economics, and Education. Lehigh has ten years experience in offering graduate-level courses via satellite to corporate partners. Since 1999, asynchronous web-based courses have also been offered at the graduate level and more recently, offered to undergraduates as well.

In early spring of 2001, the Lehigh University Instructional Technology Team embarked on a five month project to evaluate the collaboration software packages available at that time. Feedback from faculty and students involved in asynchronous distance learning initiatives indicated that real-time communication was an important component that was missing from some of our existing coursework.

After developing a comprehensive list of desired features, the team proceeded to arrange trials with a variety of vendors in an effort to identify the software best suited to meet our goals. The desired features identified by the team included:

- presentation slide display
- voice over IP (VOIP) capability
- web-page display
application sharing (in which a software application can be shown and used by participants and leader)
• whiteboard area with markup tools available to all participants
• Macintosh and PC compatibility
• High ease-of-use factor
• Intuitive user interface
• Reliability

After each trial demonstration, the team rated the capabilities of the software relative to the list of desired features. In June 2001, the team determined that the software package best able to meet our desired objectives was the Centra Symposium Collaboration Software. A funding proposal was developed and submitted to the University, and in July 2002 our implementation of Symposium began.

Symposium Implementation –
To date, Symposium has been used to support online courses in a variety of ways. In primarily asynchronous, credit-based courses, Symposium has been used to support review sessions prior to examinations, as well as to provide a mechanism for students to share their experiences related to the course material with the instructor as well as other classmates. In addition, many of the Lehigh faculty are engaged in research with corporations and other universities. Symposium has been used to support online project meetings; allowing the sharing of information and results regardless of the participants’ physical location. Symposium has also been used for training sessions in which alumni volunteers across the United States, who act as admissions representatives, are trained in how to conduct prospective student interviews.

Interactive Session Agenda –
This interactive session will be comprised of three parts. The first portion of the presentation will include a demonstration of the features in order to give participants a full view of the capabilities of the software. The second portion will detail best practices to be employed in the use of the software. The final segment will provide participants the opportunity to ask questions and explore particular areas of interest.