

Response to IU South Bend and IUPUI School of Liberal Arts Concerns about Oncourse CL

This summary was prepared by Associate Dean for Learning Technologies, Anastasia Morrone, with help from teaching center consultants from across Indiana University who serve on the Oncourse Functional Requirements Committee and members of the Oncourse development team.

Indiana University faculty and students experienced very slow response times at semester startup due to a problem with the software that manages the communication between the Oncourse CL software and the Oracle database. This problem was very serious and substantially interfered with essential course communications, especially in online courses. However, faculty were still able to communicate with their students using the Oncourse email archive distribution list for each course site during this time. To address the performance problems, a team of hardware and software experts in UITS was immediately assembled to analyze and solve the problem. The team worked around the clock until the system was stabilized on Tuesday, August 28, resulting in marked speed improvements that have continued throughout this semester.

Since that time, some specific problems have been reported by faculty and their students with key tools, such as the Assignments, Gradebook and Messages tools. We appreciate the significance of the problems, and want to assure the faculty that their reports are taken very seriously. We also report known issues from a link that is available from the Message of the Day area in My Workspace within Oncourse CL. This link provides users with up-to-date information on known issues, including when the issues have been successfully resolved.

The summary below addresses the problems reported from the IU South Bend campus followed by the problems reported from the IUPUI School of Liberal Arts. We have provided as much detail as is possible, while also sharing the progress that has been made to this point in the semester.

IU South Bend Concerns

1. "There have been issues within the last week or two with the Assignment tool, in particular."

Response:

There was an issue reported at the beginning of the semester with duplicate Assignment submissions in the database, making some student submissions inaccessible to instructors, or instructor grades and comments inaccessible to some students. This problem affected a relatively small number of course sites. All of the specific courses, assignments, and students that were impacted have been identified. Instructors whose courses were affected are being personally contacted by an instructional consultant from the campus teaching and learning center or the UITS Support Center to resolve the duplicates. The Oncourse developers have also successfully resolved the problem in the software that was causing the duplicates.

Another issue a few instructors have experienced involves the choice of replacing "null" grades with zeros in the Assignments tool. The faculty member should only choose this option if all assignments have been handed in electronically via Oncourse. If only some student submissions have been handed in electronically in Oncourse while others are on paper or via email, or the assignment is set for "non-electronic submissions," entered grades could be overwritten with zeroes when choosing to automatically replace null grades with

zeros. This can be avoided by manually replacing nulls with zeroes whenever some students have submitted that assignment manually.

2. "The main problem I continually have with Oncourse is that it is unavailable at various times during the day. "

Response:

At semester startup, Oncourse developers and database administrators performed emergency maintenance that sometimes caused the system to be unavailable. Since that time, there have been two scheduled maintenance windows of four hours and two hours, respectively, when Oncourse CL was unavailable:

Monday September 17, 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. Tuesday September 18

Thursday September 27, 12:00 a.m. to 2 a.m.

There have been no systematic outages of Oncourse since the beginning of the semester, though this does not preclude an individual experience related to his/her PC, network connection, or some other extraordinary situation. The campus support centers can assist faculty and students in troubleshooting these types of problems.

3. "I do also wish that they would have left the gradebook as it was on the old Oncourse system. All of the assignments on the old Oncourse gradebook could be viewed on the screen. The new gradebook has categories which have to be opened separately. I grade student radiographs in the radiology course I teach and have to spend 3-4 times the amount of time recording the grades as I did with the old Oncourse system."

Response:

The faculty Oncourse Priorities Committee (OPC) is continually looking at ways to improve the usability of all Oncourse tools, including the gradebook. With the September OPC vote to integrate more effectively the Assignments tool with the Gradebook tool, more grading will be possible from within the Assignments tool, thereby providing a more streamlined process for grading. For up to date information on the IU development priorities for the next release of Oncourse CL, please see:

<http://spreadsheets.google.com/pub?key=pTtkhWyLMBM2KimrzAeRQUw>

Furthermore, through our participation in the Sakai open source community, we benefit from shared development that allows us to control our destiny while also keeping pace with faculty innovation through a world-wide community of scholars and educational technologists. There are currently over 100 institutional partners in the Sakai community.

4. "I utilize Oncourse fairly heavily for my courses. I have had multiple times when the access to Oncourse is so slow that I give up."

Response:

There are several technology causes that may cause individual users to experience slow response. As noted above, Oncourse CL has been performing well since we addressed the problems at semester start up. We have also continued to tune the application, resulting in faster performance and increased reliability. It is very important that faculty experiencing problems can contact their campus center for teaching and learning or campus support center to report the problem they are experiencing. This allows us to better determine the specific nature of the problem and escalate the problem to the appropriate team within UITS. We are committed to working with users to ensure that we address the technology problem they are currently experiencing.

5. "Today I tried to open up the messages in one of my courses and 8 minutes later it had still not opened. I left to teach a class and it was still at the same place when I returned 3 hours later. Needless to say it is frustrating."

Response:

The Messages tool experienced both slow response time and browser crashes with the Internet Explorer browser early in the semester. A fix for this problem was implemented on October 12.

6. "Last Thursday it was so slow that it was taking 15 minutes to upload a simple word document. I have students who used to access it from home who no longer are able to access it. I had a student in my office today with this complaint."

Response:

An upload time of 15 minutes is not at all typical and suggests a different problem. Problems accessing Oncourse from home can be attributed to improperly configured browsers, enabling a web accelerator, satellite broadband, etc. When this happens to students, it is important that they report the problem so that we can help in troubleshooting the exact cause of the problem. Users can report a problem through the Contact Us link within Oncourse CL or via email, phone or walk-in support (see <http://oncourse.iu.edu/info> for more information).

7. "Last week I locked up Oncourse 6 different times in the course of several hours. Needless to say it is frustrating to both myself and the students. What I do is I start the opening of an attached document and then go do something else coming back to grade and then attach it at a later time. I used the new Oncourse last semester and did not have this problem."

Response:

This problem could have been part of the Oncourse outage at the beginning of the semester, general network latency, the configuration of the user's computer, or with an individual internet service provider (ISP). Even the size of the document can impact performance. As noted above, we encourage to faculty report these problems to their campus center for teaching and learning or campus support center so that we can help in determining the cause of the problem.

If the “locking” problem happened while reading Message attachments, a fix was implemented on October 12 that addressed this problem.

8. “In reference to Oncourse, in general I find the system clumsy and counter intuitive although I do use it. Specifically, I would like to make an announcement and have the option of having it post to all my classes. Currently when I have an announcement for all my students, I copy and paste it to each site.”

Response:

The ability to copy announcements from class to class upon creation of the announcement is on the list of proposed improvements for a future release of Oncourse CL. There is a tool to allow users to merge announcements from one class into another, but those announcements do not display in the recent announcements section on the home view.

9. “Several of us in Psych have been having problems with Oncourse gradebook, as recently as yesterday. When entering grades, the gradebook sometimes closes unexpectedly, or switches to a different gradebook item. When this happens, all of the grades previously entered disappear. It took me four tries to enter a set of quiz grades!”

Response:

We have had reports of users experiencing gradebook display problem when using Internet Explorer (IE) version 6. The use of Firefox or IE 7 has often successfully addressed this problem. The list of supported browsers for Oncourse CL can be found at <http://kb.iu.edu/data/asxg.html>

It is also possible that the problem could have been due to a known issue with the Gradebook in which it was necessary for the instructor to save the grades that he/she has entered on each page of the gradebook display before moving to the next page. A fix for this problem was implemented on October 18.

In addition, a large classes’ gradebook could not be displayed fully at the beginning of the semester, because only the first 50 students were displaying. A fix for this problem was implemented on September 20.

10. “As you know, everyone had to switch to the new Oncourse. I started using the new Oncourse this semester and I am very disappointed.”

“Problems with SITE STATS

- 1) Unable to view student activity (e.g., login times, etc.).
 - 2) It takes days to update
 - 3) It does not give an up-to-date assessment of the last login time for students
 - 4) Not able to track a student's participation on Oncourse (i.e., activity student would engage in on Oncourse)
- The Original Oncourse showed the ‘Course Statistics’ immediately and you could click on a student's individual name and get the date and time of all logins.”

Response:

The tracking of site visits is dependent on the User Presence tool. Because of the performance problems at semester startup, User Presence was temporarily deactivated to free up internal memory. During the time

that User Presence was deactivated (August 28 through September 28), no site visit data was recorded. However, all other site statistics were accurately recorded since the beginning of the semester. A notice will be added to the Site Statistics display that alerts faculty to the fact that the site visits were not recorded during this one month period.

A batch job is run every night to update the Site stats summary.

Site stats tool provides a rich set of information on user-specific activity. It is customizable (via Preferences), searchable by user, and filterable by date and by groups (if groups have been created for the class). Additional statistics are available in the Forums tool.

IUPUI School of Liberal Arts Concerns

1. “The unpredictable instability of Oncourse CL persists (some of it related to time of access and use of different browsers, most of it Oncourse CL specific). All of the faculty who corresponded with me on this subject have learned to expect Oncourse CL to be very slow; freeze the screen; lock the program; require rebooting (this instability occurs when using any feature of Oncourse CL). As a consequence, Oncourse CL sessions become unduly and frustratingly long; class-related work often needs to be redone; time to interact with students or prepare for teaching is curtailed. The high level of frustration about the basic needs for the program’s reliability have negatively affected expectation and trust in the desirable components and capabilities of Oncourse CL, especially when compared to experiences with and knowledge of other programs, Original Oncourse and Angel, for example.”

Response:

As noted at the beginning of this report, Indiana University faculty and students experienced very slow response times at semester startup due to a problem with the software that manages the communication between the Oncourse CL software and the Oracle database. The application was stabilized on Tuesday, August 28, resulting in marked speed improvements that have continued throughout this semester. In addition, the total amount of memory allocated to Oncourse CL has been substantially upgraded to provide increased stability in the user experience.

We have experienced issues with some browsers locking up in both the Messages and Forums tools. A fix for this problem was implemented on October 12.

The only other report we have received regarding browser lockup issues was in the Syllabus tool and that issue was limited to one particular computer lab, and the lab administrator was able to resolve the issue by change the workstation configuration in that lab.

2. “Announcements and messages get lost—sending and receiving, unavoidably, indiscriminately, in no apparent pattern. Such breakdowns foil necessary communication and forum discussions, too, do not work because of postings that do not reach the intended audience even if they are marked as “sent.” As a consequence, faculty as well as students have become distrustful of all kinds of messages, forcing a return to paper and other forms of communication that the previous class management system had made obsolete. The need for having to revert to “old-fashioned” ways of communication and discussion without adequate and timely notice has increased the level of frustration because the

unreliability of those features forced unexpected changes in already well designed and planned courses. Traditionally conceived courses were less affected, of course, than online course for which the inability to communicate effectively was especially disadvantageous.”

Response:

There are three separate issues related to the Messages tool:

Earlier in the semester, messages sent from the Oncourse Message tool to email addresses were not copied in the receiver’s Inbox in the Message tool; this often created confusion. As of September 19, messages sent “To Recipients' Email Address(es)” also have a copy placed in recipient’s received folder in the Messages tool.

Messages sent to external email addresses hosted on IU's Webmail service may appear blank when displayed in the Webmail client. In Webmail, a message will appear as a link labeled unnamed that you must click to read the message text. As a workaround, instructors can use the Email Archive to send email messages to all course participants, informing them what to do when they receive messages (from Messages) in IU Webmail.

The issue of messages sent and received internally from within the Messages tool that appear to be blank or empty is currently under investigation. Regarding missing Forum postings and lost Announcements, we have not received any reports of these issues, so we encourage the faculty members who have experienced this problem to contact the UITS Support Center so that we can help in addressing the problem.

3. “The inability of students to send assignments easily, promptly, and with confidence that they reach the instructor as intended is probably the most devastating problem with which faculty and students have to deal under current circumstances. The damage from this failure of the program is unfortunately irreversible and has negatively affected student success—in perception if not in practice. Even with efforts to “locate” assignments lost in space (many of the incidents reports speak to this problem and reveal that often there has been no solution) most faculty had to abandon this feature of Oncourse CL altogether. Closely related to the inability to manage course assignments reliably is the dissatisfaction with the program’s grade book feature. The more experienced (often older) faculty have been able to return to ways of managing grades they learned and perfected in earlier days, the faculty more dependent on web-based programs, including associate faculty, have been more frustrated.”

Response:

As described earlier in this report, there was an issue reported at the beginning of the semester with duplicate Assignment submissions in the database, making some student submissions inaccessible to instructors, or instructor grades and comments inaccessible to some students. This problem affected a relatively small number of course sites. All of the specific courses, assignments, and students that were impacted have been identified. Instructors whose courses were affected are being personally contacted by an instructional consultant from the campus teaching and learning center or the UITS Support Center to resolve the duplicates. The Oncourse developers have also successfully resolved the problem in the software that was causing the duplicates.

The faculty Oncourse Priorities Committee (OPC) voted to refactor the Assignments tool and coding is currently underway, with extensive testing slated for early spring. The rewritten tool is targeted to be available starting with the summer 2008 terms. The rewriting of the Assignments tool will focus primarily on

perfecting the stability of the tool, improving ease-of-use, and simplifying user interaction. The simplification will be most noticeable in the interaction between the Assignments tool and the Gradebook tool. For a list of the IU development priorities for the next release of Oncourse CL, please see:

<http://spreadsheets.google.com/pub?key=pTtkhWyLMBM2KimrzAeRQUw>

Again, as described earlier in this report, a few instructors have experienced involves the choice of replacing “null” grades with zeros in the Assignments tool. The faculty member should only choose this option if all assignments have been handed in electronically via Oncourse. If only some student submissions have been handed in electronically in Oncourse while others are on paper or via email, or the assignment is set for “non-electronic submissions,” entered grades could be overwritten with zeroes when choosing to automatically replace null grades with zeros. This can be avoided by manually replacing nulls with zeroes whenever some students have submitted that assignment manually.

The known issue that made it necessary for an instructor to save the grades that he/she has entered on each page of the Gradebook display before moving to the next page was resolved on October 18.

4. “Faculty have articulated their disappointment and frustration about the serious shortcomings of Oncourse CL in many ways and with numerous concrete examples to underscore their dissatisfaction. They would like the program to work! Or, they would like to have a workable alternative (some schools, like Medicine and Business, are using Angel, for example). As teachers faculty find it difficult to understand, however, that they were forced to switch from Original Oncourse to Oncourse CL before Oncourse CL was fully functional and without a reliable fall-back system in place. Good teachers know that it is imperative to plan for alternatives concerning certain situations and proceedings in the classroom, foremost among them technology-dependent demonstrations and course assignments. It is hard for them to imagine why the transition to Oncourse CL was not planned in comparable fashion. It seemed especially ironic to quite a few faculty that the IUPUI chancellor’s announcement of the successful expansion of Angel—also developed at IU—coincided with UITS’s apology about the shortcomings of the transition to Oncourse CL at the meeting of the Indianapolis Faculty Council. At that time, two weeks into the semester, the hope was that the problems would be solved and that use of the course-management system would return to a normal and reliable mode of operation. That has not happened. Faculty and students continue to struggle with break-downs, irretrievable loss of information, communication pieces, and assignments, and persistent non- or ill-functionality of certain features, much to the detriment of successful teaching and learning. By now, and very unfortunately, Oncourse CL has earned a reputation as a very promising system with potentially powerful features that at this point in development and application cannot even handle the basic requirements teachers and students reasonably expect for face-to-face as well as virtual classroom use.”

Response:

There were a number of known issues with Oncourse CL that have been successfully resolved through the combined efforts of developers at IU and other Sakai partner institutions. Furthermore, under the direction of the faculty Oncourse Priorities Committee (OPC), the development priorities for Oncourse CL focus almost entirely on tuning existing functionality, rewriting where necessary (as with the work on the Assignments tool), and addressing known issues. With respect to the Oncourse CL functionality, the application provides the flexibility to accomplish a variety of instructional goals through the use of a rich set of tools, some of which were never available in original Oncourse. We are confident that our continued participation in the Sakai open source community will ensure a powerful application that will serve us well at Indiana University.