Wimba providing classroom alternative in light of flu outbreaks

November 4 2009, By Andrew Katz

As U.S. cases of the H1N1 flu steadily rise, colleges and universities nationwide are arranging other means of connecting students with their peers, professors and administrators, should an outbreak occur.

For a growing number of institutions, the choice is Wimba: a set of collaborative learning solutions that aim to further education by presenting students and professors with an alternative and interactive method of the traditional classroom environment.

Providing [software](#) that allows students either to complement or augment existing face-to-face courses or to teach and meet entirely online is the company's overall goal, said Matt Wasowski, senior director of customer programs.

"It's sort of two-fold in the sense that not only are we focused on helping teaching and learning courses, but there's a lot of administrative sides to the equation as well where we help colleges and universities, we help staff meet online, we help different certain groups of universities get together," he added.

Though Wimba software is primarily used in the instructional side of education, it has seeped into areas outside the classroom.

"It's also meetings and professional development," Wasowski said. "It's not just classes. It's not just helping a history class online or a marketing class online. It's also helping deans or provosts or administrators in the

administrative side of a school."

According to its Web site, Wimba Collaboration Suite "enables institutions to bridge the gap between technology and pedagogy by supplementing course management systems with the proven disciplines of in-person learning environments."

As the company's "largest comprehensive offering" available for college students, Collaboration Suite "consists of three separate products," Wasowski sai. "One of them is Wimba Classroom, but there is also Wimba Voice and Wimba Pronto, which are different complementary tools."

With Wimba Voice, students can speak, write and listen online by incorporating "the use of threaded voice boards, voice-enabled e-mail, embedded voice within course pages, as well as live group discussions and debates," the site states.

Wimba Pronto, the second main component, is an instant-messaging service where users can blend audio and video conferencing, discuss books in public or private chat rooms and write on a fully functional online whiteboard.

While these two programs are popular, Wasowski said the third application in Collaboration Suite, Wimba Classroom, is "by far the most heavily used product of the three."

From multimedia file sharing and MP3 downloading to polling and chatting with peers, Classroom is essentially the virtual environment of what users traditionally encounter face-to-face.

As universities also face the possibility of canceled classes, social events and sporting games that may result from an H1N1 flu outbreak, a

growing number of institutions have implemented plans to use Wimba software as a "back-up plan."

Wasowski said more universities are pushing for definitive measures that ensure students stay connected, including Central Michigan University, Kansas State University, the University of Maryland and as Marshall University in West Virginia,.

"There's really been a very, very big push for that," Wasowski said, noting that using the software as an H1N1 contingency plan has "probably become the new hottest use of Wimba."

As the company, based out of New York City, readies itself for a possible outbreak, it continues to maintain partnerships with leading textbook publishers.

Wasowski said Wimba, which has spread to nearly 1,000 universities across approximately 40 countries, is working with McGraw-Hill and Pearson to include the interactive software in new editions of electronic textbooks.

The purpose of the joint venture is to "integrate a lot of our software into their e-textbooks to make them much more collaborative and engaging," he said. Students have the "ability to incorporate vocal exercises and contact classmates of theirs" rather than simply read text in books or online.

In addition to the aforementioned products, K-12 students can use Wimba Create, an extensive offering of everyday learning techniques including flashcards and self-test questions, to augment or replace a form of the traditional classroom experience.

Aside from Wimba, another leading player in the field of hybrid and

distance education is Blackboard, which connects students, teachers and administrators through Web-based learning programs.

Based in Washington, DC, Blackboard extends to more than 5,000 institutions worldwide and has proven popular in allowing users to create Web sites and digital course content.

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ONLINE

For more information about Wimba or its interactive learning software, visit www.wimba.com

To learn more about Blackboard or its collaborative online education solutions, visit www.blackboard.com

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