



Should universities be suspicious of software giants bearing gifts?

Duke University has [announced](#) that it's adopting Cisco's [Quad](#) enterprise collaboration platform for use by its executive MBA students. The software offers some cool features like automatic transcription, enhanced search, and annotation of video lectures and content sharing over blogs, chatrooms, and in webinar-like formats. All these tools are meant to close the distance in distance learning, allowing students to participate in classes in real time and collaborate from their home bases in the US, England, Dubai, India, Russia, and China.

The enterprise software giant is entering a very crowded field. [Blackboard](#), which dominates education SAS in a Microsoft-like way, is adding new social tools, including powerful webinar features with the takeover of

[Elluminate](#)

;

[Moodle](#)

and

[Sakai](#)

, the open-source alternatives, have even better social features;

[Kaltura](#)

's open-source video solutions are used by MIT, Cornell, and Columbia;

[2tor](#),

founded by the Princeton Review's John Katzman, has best-of-breed custom online degree programs running at USC and UNC.

The increasing merging of technology into the classroom, and the opening up of markets in all the places named above, is obviously a huge opportunity for the right tech company. Josh Kim, who blogs about ed-tech at InsideHigherEd, spends lots of his time petitioning either [Microsoft](#) or

[Google](#)

to buy Blackboard.

When done right, technology has the potential to lower costs while increasing access and improving learner experience all at the same time. But what are the best-positioned companies and applications to hit that trifecta? There's a tension between technologies that seek to mimic the experience of the face to face classroom, and those that take advantage of the rich learning opportunities native to the open web. Cisco's Telepresence system, which Duke's been using for lectures since the early spring, is among the best examples of the former. I'm not convinced that enterprise software solutions at all are the best way to get the latter. One professor in the video describes Cisco's Quad services as "like Facebook but behind a firewall." Many educational technologists prefer to use [Facebook](#) itself, and [Drupal](#) , and [Twitter](#) , and [blogs](#) and [wikis](#)

(and Google docs and gchat and etherpads and RSS feeds...) to create learning environments that work like the web.

*By Anya Kamenetz*

*Source: [fastcompany.com](#)*