

Member Spotlight: Rick Dijs

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When learning about this month's featured User Group, I thought it would be prime time to also interview a Dutch customer whose interests are as broad as his skill set. Rick Dijs is a "jack-of-all-trades", with a background in agriculture, art, publishing, and retail. A change of ambitions led him to his current job at Avans University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, where he has been working with Blackboard for the past 10 years.

Rachel Reiss: Ok, for starters, tell us where you work?

Rick Dijs: Avans University of Applied Sciences, located in the Southern part of the Netherlands.

RR: I've learned that no two System Administrators do the same thing. How would you describe your work?

RD: I've been doing this for about 10 years now. In the beginning, it was both a bit functional and a bit technical, but now we have an application manager who takes care of the functional part. We are still discovering which belongs to our field of work, and which belongs to the other department - technical and functional sometimes overlap. Functional has to deal with the actual functions of Blackboard products, such as knowing which buttons you click. Those people are in direct contact with our clients - they serve as a 'question beacon' for the persons responsible for each Academie's Blackboard manager.

On the technical side, we monitor the system in such a way as to be proactive in making sure there are no crashes. If we foresee that the site can get very busy, we will switch into our second server. If there are errors within Blackboard, we create a case on behind the Blackboard. So we are the link between the functional side, and Blackboard as an organization.



RR: You mentioned the term 'academie'. What does that refer to, and how would you say the Dutch education system compares to other education systems around the world?

RD: From a naming perspective, I think that if you compare with America or the UK, you have a huge difference. In the Netherlands, we say 'Avans Hogeschool', rather than 'Avans University'. Literally translated, Hogeschool means High School, which is lower-level than what our University-type institution is. That's why, on the international market, we promote ourselves as a University of applied sciences. From a classroom perspective, I would say that educators worldwide are more focused on examinations than those in the Netherlands. Here, it is more about learning, investigating, finding out how things work. Less and less a teacher stands in front of the classroom - oftentimes, students are given assignment, as left independently to collaborate.

RR: Would you say that the Netherlands has been quick to adopt eLearning?

RD: Given that I've been sitting on this chair for 10 years, I've seen some slight changes lately. In the beginning, eLearning was simply used as a digital archive. Now, there are more functionalities added to the Blackboard environment, and the learning environment gets more enriched to where students can profit more off of it. In Avans, we also have a project office which is simply a course in which the student serves as an instructor. This allows students to cooperate better, negotiate together. ELearning is becoming collaborative.

RR: You mentioned being a "jack-of-all-trades". How has your diverse background informed your current work?

RD: My first study was at the Agricultural school, after this I went to an Art Academy in Amsterdam. After kicking off my career with a few short jobs as a desktop publisher, I landed within the retail sector as a bookseller at the biggest bookstore in the Netherlands. After a

change of ambitions, I landed at Avans University of Applied Sciences where I started at the IT helpdesk and am now an Application Specialist/Blackboard Administrator. Now, my agricultural background is far, far away, but design is something that is still in my veins. I like diving into style sheets and commenting on weird design flaws.

RR: Speaking of design, I see you used to work as a self-employed cartoon artist. Could you please elaborate?

RD: [laughing] A spare time job. Scott Hurrey and Mark Hamilton were my victims this April at the Blackboard Teaching and Learning conference in the Netherlands. If I am relaxed and have a piece of paper, I may make a sketch. (pictures below)



Can you see the resemblance?

RR: What's your go-to space on the Community site?

RD: System admin updates. I personally really like the Ideas space a lot, too. We've submitted quite a few things and one of them, the addition of the suffix field, has been implemented. Many Dutch people have a two-part last name, such as 'De Vrees.' If someone named Jan De Vrees is creating an account on the Community Site, he can now type 'De' into the suffix field, and 'Vrees' into the last name field. Since this naming scheme is common in many other nationalities, we are happy to see that Blackboard has acknowledged our suggestion and made their website more culturally appropriate.

RR: What would you like to see changed or added to the site?

RD: I think at the moment, it has exactly what it needs to have. I like that you can chat with people all over the world. So nothing particularly - I only see 'plusses'.

RR: And ending, as usual, with some inspiration: what's your favorite quote?

RD: "It takes two to tango." It's a very common one, but something that applies both personally and professionally. You need to be able to collaborate and cooperate. Those who can move past stubbornness are most successful.

Thanks, Rick! Not only did we want to show off your knowledge, but your incredible artistic skill:
<https://www.karickaturen.nl/>