Effective Use of Blackboard for On-Line Courses

Things you can do with Blackboard to make your on-line course more effective.

This document is broken into areas of Blackboard that you may or may not choose to use. The first section reflects items that are not specific to an area in Blackboard, rather they are of a general nature and should be considered regardless of what areas you choose to use in Blackboard. Finally, this does not reflect every area of Blackboard or how you might structure content within Blackboard.

GENERAL
1. Use any functionality that you believe will better engage your learners.
2. Always include your syllabus. It is most likely to be found if you attach it to the Course Information area.
3. Be very active in the course. Make yourself accessible.
   a. Participate in the Discussion Board by providing insight and input into comments made by class participants in the discussion.
   b. Send regular e-mails (to the class) informing the participants of course requirements, deadlines, changes, etc.
   c. Send e-mails to individuals in the course in feedback to assignments. Provide helpful information. Any communication with an individual will enhance your on-line relationship and their confidence in completing the requirements of the course.
   d. Post announcements in a timely fashion and make sure your students know via e-mail that you are using the announcement section of the course. If you post an announcement it is good to also inform the class that an announcement has been posted.
   e. Provide timely feedback to assignments.
   f. Documented assignments should be returned with feedback. This can be done by saving the file as a PDF and returning the PDF with comments.
4. Turn off any functionality that you are not using so it does not become a distraction to the learner. This can be done in the Control Panel>Course Settings>Area Availability.
   a. The fewer buttons the learner must wade through to find what they need the more they will be able to learn and the less they will become frustrated with your course.
   b. Learners will loose confidence in you as an on-line instructor if you leave elements on the screen that are not used.
5. Take some time before setting up your course in Blackboard to decide how you want it structured.

ANNOUNCEMENTS
1. Post announcements about critical information.
   a. Good announcements would include, emerging deadline, course requirement reminder (specific version of software, text, etc), special events that correlate to class (e.g. cultural event announcement for a foreign language class), Date and time for a Virtual Classroom requirement.
   b. It may also be used to inform students of changes in course logistics like a class cancellation due to an ill instructor.
2. Do not leave announcements posted that are no longer pertinent.
   c. Use the functionality that allows you to schedule when an announcement is posted.
      Under Announcement > Add Announcement > Options (make sure to check the
      Display boxes after selection your desired date range.
3. Do not post more than one item in a single announcement. Make each item its own
   announcement. If you post an announcement that includes two different events it is likely
   that some class participants will confuse the times, or miss the second item in the
   announcement.

FACULTY INFORMATION
1. Post as much information in the Faculty Information section as you are willing to provide.
   Students like to know that you are “real”.
   d. Do not post information like address, home phone, and children’s names.
   e. Information that should absolutely be posted includes:
      i. E-mail
      ii. Work phone
      iii. Office Location
      iv. Office Hours
      v. A picture can be helpful

COURSE INFORMATION/COURSE DOCUMENTS/ASSIGMENTS
1. It is not necessary to use all of these portions of Blackboard. In fact, it can be confusing to
   the learner unless you are very clear about what will be placed where. The same type of
   content can be placed in any of these areas.
2. Types of content may include:
   a. syllabi
   b. handouts
   c. assignments
   d. lecture notes
   e. PowerPoint presentations
   f. Software
3. Insert special guest content form a content expert. (Article, video clip, lecture notes)
4. Post examples of good and bad of work and explain how expectation were or were not met.
   You may choose to have students try and identify what was good ore bad about the
   example.
5. Chunk your material in logical learning segments.
   f. Use Folders in Course Information, Course Documents, and/or Assignments to
      chunk various projects or session information. Example: If you have 12 major
      sections in your course use a folder to chunk all information related to a given
      section. Folders could also be used to chunk information for specific class periods.
   g. Use Learning Units to chunk various item in the same way you might use folders.
      Be aware that Learning Units can not contain folders.
   h. However you decide to chunk material you must do it consistently. Folders and
      Learning Units must simplify access to content chunks, not impair access.
   i. When you are considering how to chunk your material it is important to know your
      options.
      vi. Course Information, Course Documents, and Assignments can all contain
          Folders, Items, and/or Learning units.
      vii. A Folder can contain: Folders, Items, and/or Learning Units
      viii. A Learning Unit can contain: Items and/or Files
j. It is a good idea to map out how you will chunk and categorize your course content before you start adding it to Blackboard. You will not be able to click and drag content items from one area of Blackboard. Moving an item requires removing it from one area and then reinserting it in the area where it is desired.

k. What kinds of Items might you include in a Folder or Learning Unit? Learning Units, Unit Plans, Unit, Lesson Plan, Lesson, Lab, Module, Exercise Tutorial, Demonstration, Simulation, Summarizer, Activator, etc.

l. Avoid using multiple locations to maintain similar

6. Be very clear and consistent in where you place course elements.

m. Learners will lose confidence in you as an on-line instructor if you are not clear and consistent. This will undermine your ability to be effective as an on-line instructor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
1. If you have required texts for your class you should include that in the Bibliography.
2. Listing texts referenced in other areas of the class can be helpful
3. Listing recommended texts for research can be helpful and appreciated greatly

EXTERNAL LINKS
1. Use the External Links section.
   n. to link to resources that might help them in better understanding a given topic or writing a paper.
   o. Do not link to things that will take them on tangents that don’t aid in the objectives of the class.
   p. Make sure you really want to link to a site. Linking to the site says you recommend the site

CALENDAR
1. Students like to have one place they can go to see what must be done by when. This can be accomplished in a syllabus, but most are now familiar with and more comfortable with a calendar view. (especially when they have options for how to view the calendar as BlackBoard does).
2. Use the course calendar to remind students of major events and deadlines around the class.
3. It can be good to set targets for completion of segments of reading assignments, even if the assignment is not due until later. Begin asking questions via the Discussion Board about those segments, to motivate earlier engagement in the course. You may want to give some form of credit for participation in discussion.

SEND E-MAIL
1. As noted in the General section it is important to be active in the on-line class. One way to do this is to use e-mail to communicate regularly. You can communicate using the group option in e-mail or to individuals.
2. When posting an important announcement it is good to send an e-mail to accompany that announcement.
3. Send e-mail when there are any changes to course plans and/or requirements
4. Send e-mail to remind students of deadlines
5. Send e-mail to provide feedback of student’s assignments
6. Send e-mail to share information about course content like additional instructions for an assignment.
7. E-mail can be used to turn in assignments (However, the Digital Drop Box will prevent taking up space in your e-mail.)
DISCUSSION BOARD
1. The Discussion Board can be used to engage learners in a given topic.
2. Require Discussion Board posts for credit.
3. Post your expectations for use of Discussion Board activity.
4. Make sure you require meaningful and original comments. There is a tendency for some to simply restate what others have written.
5. Give feedback in the Discussion Board to the comments that are made. Encourage continued discussion.
6. Make deadlines for discussion questions
7. Discussion Boards can encourage quieter students to inject their thoughts and ideas. Some students may have difficulty with spontaneous responses. For them the Discussion Board gives them an opportunity to organize their thoughts before sharing them. Students who may not lead a discussion in class may do so within a Discussion Board.
8. Create small Discussion Groups and then have them draft something collaboratively and share it in a broader context (the entire class).
9. Post student work and have others comment on it in a constructive way. (May be work from a previous class. Example: post a bad example and ask the Discussion Group to discuss what could be done to improve the work or how it could be done differently.)
10. Encourage discussion where student both ask and answer questions.

VIRTUAL CLASSROOM
1. If you use the Virtual Classroom make sure you have communicated via e-mail and announcements of the date, time, and duration.
2. Ask open ended questions to get your students to provide meaningful discussion.
3. Ask the students to maximize the chat window.
4. Get familiar with the Virtual Classroom before attempting to use it.
5. Use the Virtual Classroom to post virtual office hours.
6. Use the Virtual Classroom to conduct an on-line discussion. Use the “private” feature to have students post questions anonymously (out of view to the class) that you may then answer to the larger audience.

DIGITAL DROP BOX
1. Ask students to post their assignments in the Digital Drop Box. This way they always have access to what they submitted, and there is not a question as to what they gave you.

ASSESSMENT TOOL
1. Use the short answer or essay question to require a “1 minute paper”. Use the time tool to limit the time in which a response can be given.
2. Use the quiz tools to provide regular interaction and remediation.
3. Use a free-form field in tests and quizzes to allow students to provide any feedback on question wording.
4. Use quizzes periodically to determine if students are understanding concepts and topics.
5. Use Surveys to ask for anonymous feedback. These results are not recorded in the gradebook.

GRADEBOOK
1. Post grades in the gradebook regularly.
2. Send an e-mail communication indicating what points were deducted for so that they will understand what the grade reflects.
3. Don’t forget to make item visible.

For assistance or questions with Blackboard contact the North Institute for Educational Technology.