

CHALKDUST

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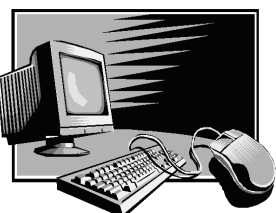
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Blackboard Upgrade: An Overview

During the mid-year break the UTDC Educational Technology Group and ITS have undertaken a number of important jobs to improve Blackboard performance and functionality, including server and data maintenance, Blackboard application upgrade to version 6.1.5 and installation of a network load-balancing switch. We also implemented LDAP authentication for VUW staff and students, which made separate Blackboard passwords unnecessary, and performed a Blackboard user account audit.

The installation of the load-balancing switch and adjustments to the network configuration have already resulted in a better distribution of the network traffic and fewer Blackboard errors. The upgraded Blackboard system is performing better under high user load at the beginning of the second trimester, than at the beginning of the first trimester, 2004.

The application upgrade to Blackboard Release 6.1.5 has fixed a number of known problems, including those related to the online gradebook and the use of tests and surveys. As a result of the upgrade, you can now use the following two features that were not available in the first trimester:

- You can choose **VUW Letter Grades** as a display option in the Gradebook. Letter Grades are now displayed correctly to students.
- The **Fill-in-the-blanks** assessment question option now works correctly.

For an overview of the new features in Blackboard 6.1.5, see the New Features article on page 4.

To implement the upgrade we had to make the main Blackboard site temporarily unavailable, while providing access to an alternative Blackboard installation for those who requested it.

UTDC would like to thank everyone who made efforts to accommodate the timing of this Blackboard outage and planned their work around the downtime. Without your cooperation and patience we would not have been able to complete the tasks and achieve the set targets.

However, the upgrade exercise also demonstrated that Blackboard has established itself as a critical VUW system, one which needs to be available to staff and students continuously throughout the year. The upgrade also confirmed that there are no longer any 'quiet' times, as far as teaching, learning and course administration are concerned. It is clear that Blackboard needs to remain available even during the weeks that are marked as official university breaks in the Calendar. These are now the times when staff prepare courses for the following trimester and contact enrolled students with pre-course information and announcements, and when students check their course results published in Blackboard.

Flexible learning at VUW is clearly now a reality. We are supporting courses in blended, distance and open-learning modes. This result highlights the need for the forthcoming flexible learning strategy. UTDC are working with ITS and SMT to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to maintain a robust learning environment for flexible learning delivery.

Blackboard Stats: Trimester 1, 2004:

- About 350 courses (two thirds of them undergraduate) with over 12,000 students, were taught in the first trimester of 2004 using Blackboard.
- Approximately 550 instructors and teaching assistants were associated with these Blackboard courses.

eLearning in New Zealand: *Highlights from the Ministry*



from <http://www.steo.govt.nz/ELearningProjects.aspx>

Recently the Tertiary Education Commission of the Ministry of Education has put forward a number of projects and initiatives to support and promote the development of the e-Learning capability of New Zealand's tertiary education sector. These initiatives include:

Interim Tertiary e-Learning Framework

The Ministry of Education and National Library worked with other government agencies and representatives from the tertiary education sector to develop an Interim Tertiary e-Learning Framework, for the period 2004-7.

The framework identifies seven key action areas that need to be addressed at a national level:

- Development of a vibrant, inclusive 'community of practice', through which practitioners are able to share e-information and experiences in a collegial manner
- Reliable research into e-Learning in the New Zealand context
- Professional development for staff in tertiary organisations
- Adoption of relevant technical and design standards for e-Learning developments
- Development of appropriate legal and policy frameworks for electronic rights management
- Development of qualifications and credentialling frameworks that recognise flexible learning pathways
- Exploration of new e-Learning opportunities for marginalised learners

This provides a framework for a more detailed e-Learning action plan, which will be developed over the course of 2004.

The Ministry of Education will coordinate the development of the action plan, in active partnership with the tertiary education sector. To achieve this, a representative body for tertiary e-Learning will be established. It will be called the Tertiary e-Learning Reference Group.

The Interim Tertiary e-Learning Framework will be eventually superseded by an integrated, pan-sector e-Learning strategy that will encompass the schools and early childhood sectors, as well as the tertiary sector. To develop the integrated e-Learning strategy, the Ministry of Education will undertake a public consultation exercise, inviting input from across the whole education sector, and from other stakeholders.

Draft Tertiary e-Learning Standards Development

The Ministry of Education is seeking feedback on a document that provides an overview of existing and emerging e-Learning standards, and a set of recommendations for interim tertiary e-Learning standards.

Consultation on the draft e-Learning Standards Overview document is currently being sought through the Wiki Wiki Web (tertiary.customer.onesquared.net/~TertiaryELearningStandards/Main/HomePage) collaborative web site. When you register, you will be allocated a password for using the wiki to provide your feedback. Register by emailing your name, organisation (if relevant) and contact details to elearn.feedback@minedu.govt.nz. No password is necessary for viewing the site.

The draft document was produced by eLearnz (www.elearnz.org), an open consortium of New Zealand tertiary organisations working in e-Learning.

Tertiary e-Learning Research Fund

The Ministry of Education has received twenty-six applications to its contestable fund for research into the current context and future impact of e-Learning on tertiary learners and providers in the New Zealand context.

UTDC has been successful in receiving on of these awards. This will allow us to conduct research in the area of e-Learning organisational standards.

New Zealand's Tertiary e-Learning Portal - eLearn

eLearn (www.elearn.govt.nz) is currently being redeveloped to play a key role in facilitating collaboration (working together), networking (creating shared pathways), and information-sharing between e-Learning practitioners, tertiary education organisations and government agencies.

The portal is being developed to:

- promote focused discussion and the open exchange of relevant knowledge and experiences
- highlight key contacts, interest groups and events related to e-Learning practice in New Zealand and internationally
- provide robust advice to assist in the development of e-Learning in New Zealand
- provide a means for the portal's user communities to connect with one another on the development of initiatives.

The new eLearn portal is due to go live at the end of August. If you wish to be contacted about the portal, or if have content or any other suggestions that you would like to be considered, please write to elearn.feedback@minedu.govt.nz.

e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund - eCDF

The e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund (eCDF) will make available \$28 million over four years from 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2007.

The eCDF is designed to improve the tertiary education system's capability to deliver e-Learning that improves education access and/or quality for learners. The eCDF aims to help achieve co-operative and strategic implementation of e-Learning in tertiary education organisations. The eCDF is administered by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC - www.tec.govt.nz/funding/strategic/ecdf/ecdf.htm).

UTDC is also involved in a number of eCDF funded projects.

Tips on Accessibility and Your BB Course

Here are some simple guidelines that may help improve the accessibility of your course in Blackboard for people with impairments and disabilities, and in so doing, improve its user-friendliness for all users.

1. Images

Always accompany images that form part of course material with descriptive text that summarises key image content. Descriptive text cannot replace the image, but nonetheless, it must convey sufficient information to provide an effective alternative.

In Blackboard there are two related ways of doing this,

- The first way is always to add image content using the *Display Media File Within the Page* option, selected in section 2 of the Add Content form. Clicking *Submit* to upload the image file will take you to an additional form, *File Options*. In section 1 of this form, *Multimedia Options*, always add a short description in the text field, Alternate text, provided for this purpose.
- The second, additional approach, is to add a URL to an extended description of the image via the URL text field in this same section of the form.

2. Text

It is important to remember that people with visual or physical impairments may not be able to fully or easily browse text. Some may use assistive technology that forces users to progress in a linear fashion through what might be quite a lengthy piece of text. This also applies to navigating online content in relation to menus, directory structures and folders (see 'Site Structure and Menus' below).

Use headings in text to chunk larger sections of text and help prepare/inform the reader about what follows. Assistive technology, e.g. modern screen reader software used by people with visual impairments, creates an outline view of a document by listing the headings you create, first, then allowing the user to jump to the section they require. This helps prevent the user from having to laboriously work through the whole document to reach required content.

In general,

- Ensure that headings accurately indicate document content.
- In HTML use 'h1' 'h2' 'h3' etc. heading tags for this.
- If you are using a word processing package such as Microsoft Word, use 'Heading 1' 'Heading 2' 'Heading 3' styles. Word has an outline view of your document to assist with this (go to View > Outline),
- Do not use heading tags or styles to format text, e.g. to make text larger or bolder.

3. Site Structure and Menus

It has already been mentioned earlier that one of the most important issues affecting accessibility for people who use assistive technology relates to not being able to *browse* web pages or documents. Screen readers, for example, read linearly from one end of a menu, page or full document to the other – they read/speak every menu and every piece of text and/or image description. This process continues until the user signals to the device to stop, e.g. to jump to a heading or follow a link in a web page.

In general, when structuring your course web site in Blackboard,

- Name menu items accurately and succinctly in a way that clearly indicates content 'at the other end',
- Limit items in the course menu (on the left of the screen in BB) to as few as possible,
- But, make use of menu items to reduce the number of 'clicks' to navigate to a required item of content (e.g. avoid, if possible, forcing users to navigate into a folder to access content),
- Try not to make the site structure too 'deep' e.g. keep the levels of nested folders as few as possible - this avoids unnecessary navigation 'clicks',
- Always use headings to break up text ('Text' above),
- Describe image content briefly and succinctly unless an extended description is required.

Character Limits in Blackboard

COURSE CONTENT:

- Title field (item, folder, learning unit) = 255
- Description text field = virtually unlimited*
- Name of attached file link = 255

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- Subject = 255
- Body = unlimited*

ASSIGNMENTS

- Title field (item, folder, learning unit) = 255
- Description text field = virtually unlimited*

EXTERNAL LINK:

- Title = 255
- URL = 255
- Description = 4000

GROUPS:

- Group Name = 255
- Group Description = 4000

DISCUSSION BOARD:

- Forum Name = 255
- Forum Description = 4000
- Message Subject = 255
- Message = unlimited*

CALENDAR ITEM:

- Subject = 100
- Message = 4000

DROP BOX:

- Comment to attached file = 4000

TASK:

- Subject = 255
- Description = 4000

ASSESSMENTS:

- Assessment name = 245
- Instructions = 4000
- Description = 4000
- Question text field = 4000
- Answer field (Instructor) = 2000
- Answer field - Fill in the blank (Student) = 255
- Answer field - Essay (Student) = 32000/+ *
- Correct Feedback = 1500
- Incorrect Feedback = 1500
- Question URL = 255
- URL Name = 32

QUESTION POOL:

- Pool Name = 245
- Pool Description = 2000
- Category Name = 32

GRADE BOOK:

- Title for Item = 245
- Points Possible (a single grade) = 32

* The theoretical limit is 2MG.

New Features in Blackboard 6.1.5



Quick Edit

The Quick Edit feature allows instructors to make changes to a course content page from within the course view. When instructors access a course from the student course view, this shortcut allows them to edit course content, without having to open the Content Area through the Course Control Panel. You'll find this feature in the upper right hand corner of the screen. Just click on the words **Edit View** and it brings you to the Instructor version.

Spell Check Editor

A spell-checker has been added to the text box editor for users to identify and correct spelling errors. The spell-check feature is supported by a full English dictionary and users may store custom word lists as a cookie on their local machine. Please note, the custom word list will only be available from your local computer.

Glossary

The Glossary feature is a collection of terms for a course. It is particularly useful as a reference when students are reviewing new or complex material because the explanations for difficult concepts are defined by the instructor

and available right in the course.

Each course has its own Glossary of terms. Each entry consists of the term and an accompanying definition. The Glossary must be enabled by the instructor before Students can view it. To turn on the Glossary, simply enable it as a Course Tool and then add it to the Course Menu.

Instructors can download a Glossary as a comma delimited data file (CSV). Each entry is separated by a hard return and within each entry the term and the definition are separated by a comma. Downloading a Glossary is useful for adding terms to another course. The Glossary can be modified offline and then uploaded to another course.

Messaging

The Messages feature gives each course a private and secure system for communication that functions similar to email. Keep in mind that Messages cannot be sent or received outside of the users in the course. Messages are usually accessed through the Communications area of a course. The messaging feature can be used for private communication between the participants of a course without having to send emails.

New Passwords in Bb

A new authentication procedure has been implemented with Blackboard.

VUW staff and students no longer need to have a separate password to login to Blackboard.

University staff should now use their staff domain password. This is the password used to login to your work computer, VUW email, iProc, etc.

Students enrolled in VUW courses should use their student domain password. This is the password they use to login to SCS computers and email.

Note: If you cannot remember your staff or student domain password, please contact the ITS Service Desk (its-service@vuw.ac.nz)

Oops!

Once a lecturer called us to ask why it was taking so long to upload a file into Blackboard. We checked and discovered that the size of this file was almost 20 MB. No wonder it took a long time to upload... Imagine how long it would take a student to download it from home!

Food for thought: To download 1 MB of data, it will take roughly 5 min @ 28.8 kb/s; 2 min @ 56 kb/s; 1 min @ 128 kb/s and 0.5 min @ 300 kb/s.

Tips and Tricks

Assignments

Remember that if you require students to submit assignments electronically, it is better to use the new Assignment facility than the Digital Drop Box. One of the best things about the Assignment feature is the ability to bulk download the assignments your students have submitted and a built-in place for them to receive direct feedback on their work. It also saves you time because you don't have to save every file with the student's name any longer. Blackboard automatically puts the user name in the name of the file so you can tell immediately whose file you are reviewing. The Assignment feature has a better recording and tracking mechanism compared to the Drop Box, which allows students to follow the life cycle of their assignments; it also creates

an entry in the Online Gradebook for each assignment automatically.

If you would like to request a copy of the Working with Assignments tip sheet please contact Irina Elgort.

Online Gradebook

In the new version of the online Gradebook the spreadsheet view is limited to 999 students. If your course has more than 999 students you will need to use the 'View Grade By Gradebook Item' option which displays the full list of students. This option also allows instructors to search through assignments, use filters to find a specific assignment, and manage items.

Note: You cannot currently download more than 999 rows from the gradebook into a CSV file. Blackboard will address this issue in the next upgrade.

Upcoming Courses

Blackboard I: QuickStart to Teaching with Blackboard

August 3, Tuesday, 10 am - 12 noon
Venue: RB901 (top floor of the Library)

August 31, Tuesday, 10 am - 12 noon
Venue: KK217 (CyberCommons)

Blackboard II: Diving in Deeper

August 6, Friday, 1 - 3 pm
Venue: RB901 (top floor of the Library)

September 1, Wednesday, 10 am - 12 noon
Venue: KK217 (CyberCommons)

Enrolment URL:

<http://www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/workshops/>

