

CHALKDUST

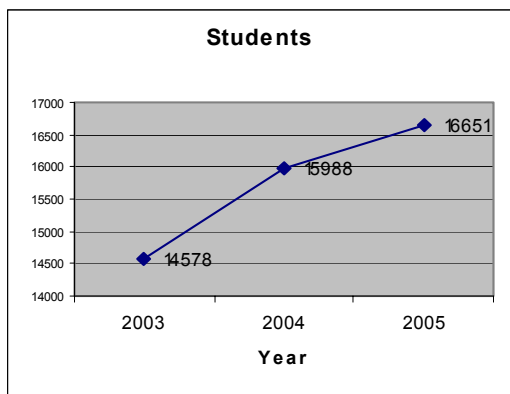
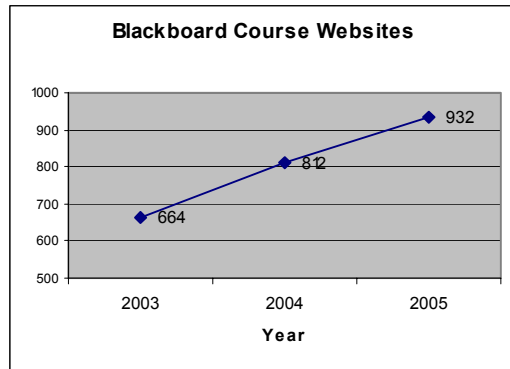
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The Year That Was: 2005 Blackboard Usage Statistics

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It has become a tradition to include an overview of Blackboard use in the year's first issue of ChalkDust. Blackboard usage data collected over the last three years shows a steady increase in both the number of Blackboard course web sites initiated for teaching, and the number of students enrolled in them. In 2005, 932 course web sites were set up in Blackboard for teaching. This is a 15% increase compared to 2004, and a 40% increase over 2003. The 2005 total roughly translates into 40% of all courses offered by Victoria last year. The proportion of undergraduate courses in Blackboard is even higher - 54% of all undergraduate courses offered by VUW in 2005.



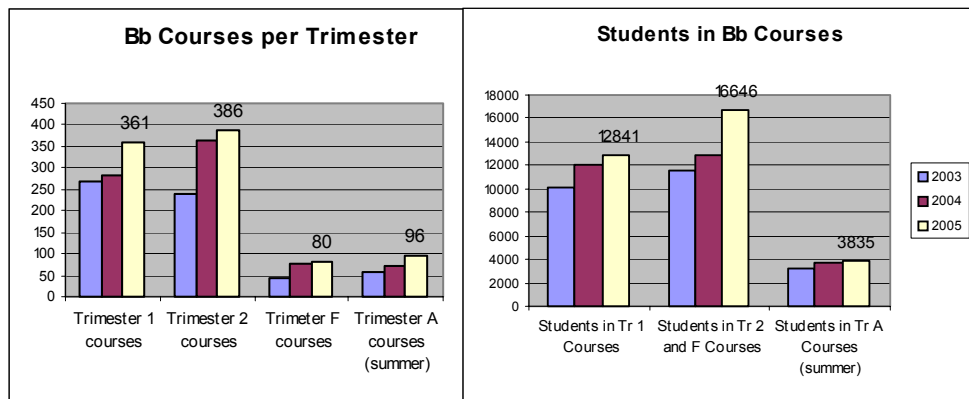
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A total of 16,651 unique students were enrolled in courses taught in Blackboard in 2005 - 85% of all enrolled students. In 2005, the second trimester continued to be the busiest, with 386 courses taught in Blackboard; but the first trimester was almost as busy, with 361 courses set up in Blackboard (an increase of 27% compared to 2004).

These figures are an important indication that VUW has entered into advanced stages of e-learning adoption in terms of the number of users.

Comments and feedback on any articles published in this newsletter are welcome and should be directed to the editor: Irina.Elgort@vuw.ac.nz



Is there a link between LMS and 'learning'?



Reminders

Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as Blackboard, are now widely used by tertiary education providers, even though they were a novelty only 3-4 years ago. In New Zealand, for example, every university has at least one LMS, with around 40% of all taught courses having a LMS web site. In the UK, according to the 2003 JISC and UCISA report, 86% of the surveyed Higher Education institution (n=102) used a LMS. A recent EDUCAUSE report (2004), which collected data from 908 Higher Education Institutions (primarily US, but some Canadian, Australian, South African and New Zealand institutions were also included), shows that 90% of these institutions had a LMS, while for research universities this figure was 100%. These results indicate that the LMS technology has reached advanced stages of adoption in tertiary education.

The use of such systems, however, has not yet reached its full potential within the sector. LMS are often successfully used to manage course delivery and administration (for example, student enrolment into the course web sites, announcements, distribution of results, etc.). When it comes to teaching and learning, these systems are often used in a very limited way, as an electronic filing cabinet for lecture notes and course information. Yet, the use of the LMS has potential to promote higher levels of student engagement with course materials and development of independent learning skills. With the help of an LMS, lecturers can set up learning environments that create new opportunities for students' collaboration and reflection.

So how can LMS (Blackboard, in our case) be used to promote deep learning?

(1) What matters is what students DO:

Think about learning activities your students will need to do when they visit the web site, rather than information they will get from it. This will help you focus on designing a web site for learning, and not just for course administration.

(2) **Less is more:** When setting up a course web site in Blackboard, choose one learning goal and create an environment that will help students achieve this goal. A web-site you create does not need to present a comprehensive coverage of the whole course.

(3) **Context is king:** consider the type of course you are teaching and your students' demographics, and choose appropriate tools for your context. For example, if you are teaching a **large undergraduate course**, you can use the survey tool to quickly gather student feedback, a task which is difficult to do in a traditional face-to-face teaching environment. If you are teaching a **post-graduate course**, consider giving your students an opportunity to create their own tests and quizzes. Creating your own assessment is one of the best ways to understand difficult concepts.

To sum up, in order to use Blackboard effectively in teaching, two main ingredients are required:

- learning activities, which are designed to take full and optimal advantage of the technology
- carefully chosen tools that enable students to learn more efficiently and effectively.

For advice and assistance with developing effective learning activities for online environments, enrol in UTDC workshops and courses, or make an individual appointment with Irina Elgort (irina.elgort@vuw.ac.nz ext. 5970).

Please request your Blackboard courses at least two weeks in advance of the time teaching starts.

You need to submit a course request for every course offered in Blackboard. If a course is taught more than once a year, it needs to be requested for each of the trimesters separately. To request access to a course, use the online course request form located at <http://intranet.vuw.ac.nz/its/support/self-help/blackboard/>.

Do not forget to make current Bb courses available to students.

When you request a new Blackboard course it is added to your course list, but it is **unavailable** to students. This gives you time to set up the course web site before releasing it to students. When you have finished with the initial set up, you need to **make your course available**. In the control panel of the course select Settings > Course Availability and click Yes, to make your course available.

Make your old courses unavailable

Students have told us that they do not want to see their old courses in Blackboard. Please make sure you make your Blackboard courses unavailable, when you finish teaching them. We currently do not disable course web sites automatically for a year, because we had a number of requests for courses to continue to be accessible to students beyond the official end-of-course date. All courses are disabled for student access in a year from the time the course was offered. Thus, all 05.1 courses will be made unavailable automatically before the start of the first trimester 2006. However, this will not apply to trimester 2 (05.2) and summer trimester (05.A) courses.

Please login to Blackboard and check that all courses that have the '05' prefix in your course list under *My Courses* have the word (*unavailable*) after the course name. If this is not the case, enter the course web site, Control Panel, choose Settings > Course Availability and click No, to make your course available.



Learning Objects: Action Research Summary (continued page 4)

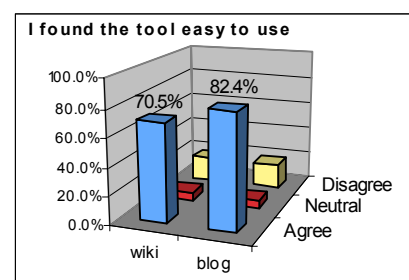
In 2005 UTDC piloted a set of new online teaching and learning tools, called Learning Objects (<http://www.learningobjects.com>). The two main Learning Objects (LO) tools are Online Journals (**blogs**) and Online Team Websites (**wiki**). Three postgraduate VUW courses volunteered to take part in the pilot, which aimed to assess the new tools from the teaching/learning and usability perspectives. The feedback we received from both staff and students at the end of the pilot was, overall, very positive.

One of the courses used both the LO wiki and blog tools. In this course, students were given an assignment to create a web-based resource guide, using the LO wiki. Students were also instructed to use the LO blog to document and comment on their own work and the work of their teams. Approximately half of all students in this course were on-campus (either full- or part-time), and half were doing it by distance. Seventeen students taking the course agreed to participate in this action research project. For the majority of these students this assignment was the first opportunity to use group web sites or online journals.

Even though wiki and blogs were new to most students, they found them easy to use. Students particularly liked that the new tools provided a flexible approach to doing their assignment: "Great being able to work on the wiki from different locations - as distance learning student this was fantastic".

Learning Objects Wiki

It is well known that one of the most challenging aspects of team work is encouraging equal contribution from all team members. The feedback we received indicates that using a wiki may be an effective way of overcoming this problem. The majority of students agreed that (1) their team was able to work well together online; (2) the use of the LO wiki encouraged better individual participation in the group assignment; and (3) using a wiki for group work had advantages over doing group work in a face-to-face environment.



WIKI	Str. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Str. D/agree	Unanswered
• Our group worked well together in an online situation	23.5%	47.1%	23.5%	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%
• Wiki encouraged better participation of each gr. member	11.8%	64.7%	11.8%	5.9%	0.0%	5.9%
• Advantages over f2f mode in doing gr. assignments	23.5%	52.9%	17.6%	0.0%	5.9%	0.0%
• Wiki worked well for creating an online resource guide	35.3%	47.1%	11.8%	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%

Eighty two percent of students thought that the use of the wiki for creating an online resource guide worked well, and 94% agreed that this online group assignment provided a valuable learning experience. Students thought that the group wiki made it easier to keep track of everybody's contribution to the assignment and encouraged better collaboration ("helped assess what I myself had done"; "the set up of the wiki allowed for a group to easily work together or separately in creating information"; "for me, acted as incentive to produce"; "the wiki gave me some idea of the issues involved in created web pages").

Learning Objects Blog

The majority of students (77%) found that keeping a blog was a good use of their time, and that it helped them in

- documenting events and processes related to the group assignment (88%);
- assessing their personal contributions (76%): "Journal was a good way to evaluate my progress of teamwork and of understanding the process of using wiki".

The use of online journals also contributed to students' ability to work better together as a group: "Journal entries allowed everyone to understand how members of the group were approaching the task."

BLOG	Str. Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Str. Disagree	Unanswered
Useful to <u>document events and processes</u>	17.6%	70.6%	0.0%	11.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Useful <u>in assessing my own contribution</u>	17.6%	58.8%	11.8%	11.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Useful <u>in evaluating the work of my group</u>	11.8%	52.9%	11.8%	23.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Helped me focus on what I have learned	17.6%	41.2%	23.5%	17.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Keeping a blog is <u>not</u> a good use of my time	5.9%	5.9%	11.8%	70.6%	5.9%	0.0%
OK with lecturer viewing my blog entries	17.6%	70.6%	11.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
OK with group members viewing my entries	5.9%	58.8%	11.8%	17.6%	5.9%	0.0%

Issues associated with opening personal journals to the lecturer and other group members was also something we wanted to explore in this pilot. The results show that, although the majority of students were positive about this, more students were in favour of the lecturer viewing their online journal entries (78%), than of sharing them with other group

Bb Capability Project 2005-6: Improving the IT platform of Blackboard



In 2001, the VUW Senior Management Team approved a business case for a flexible delivery platform, implemented using Blackboard, to support online delivery of course materials and e-learning. Blackboard was introduced to enhance students' learning activities and enable the delivery of high quality educational experiences; to support the development of new teaching initiatives involving existing students or attracting new students, both local and international; and to enable further business opportunities through the provision of online courses.

Current high usage of Blackboard indicates that the project has been a popular success, particularly with students. It is now common for staff to report that students complain if Blackboard is *not* used to support courses.

A consequence of the success of the platform adoption is, however, that its ongoing functionality has become important to the success of the University's core business. The large number of people with access to Blackboard means that it has a high visibility, particularly to the student population.

Realising the importance of providing a reliable and stable platform to support teaching and learning, in 2005 the University allocated resources to implement a Blackboard Capability Project (BCP) to improve the Blackboard IT architecture in order to

- (1) *Minimise the risk of major hardware and software failure;*
- (2) *Reduce the amount of time Blackboard is unavailable due to maintenance;*
- (3) *Improve Blackboard performance, especially during peak periods.*

The BCP has been implemented over the summer by the UTDC, with assistance provided by ITS, and we are pleased to report that the major objectives of the project have been achieved. Redundancy has been added to the network and server configurations, additional servers have been deployed and arrangements made to **enable Blackboard to continue functioning reliably during the peak staff and student usage periods at the start of the first and second trimesters.**

Information is now being collected to help us develop performance

monitoring processes, to provide early diagnosis of problems and minimise unplanned outages in the future. The new Blackboard system architecture provides a platform for upgrading Blackboard to version 7 in 2006.

One final step in the BCP is tentatively scheduled for the mid-year break, and will be performed in conjunction with another ITS upgrade project. This step will focus on creating redundancy for the file storage part of the Blackboard system.

Because the BCP focused on the underlying IT infrastructure and not the Blackboard application itself, staff and students will not see any changes in the functionality of Blackboard. The main impact of this project lies in the **added stability and reliability of the new Blackboard system, especially important during busy periods.** Another outcome of the BCP is the ability to do routine upgrades with a minimal disruption to the end user.

With the major technical limitations removed, we hope that the UTDC will be able to focus more on helping the University and each of you take better advantage of the teaching, learning and course administration opportunities Blackboard can offer.



Learning Objects: Action Report Summary (continued from page 3)

members (65%). Some students felt that online journals did not provide a fair account of their groups' work, because some students, whose contribution to the group assignment had been significant, were too shy to report this in their journal entries.

In their negative comments students reported

- the lack of flexibility in creating the look and feel of web pages ("it wasn't very easy to make it (wiki) look how I'd really want a web resource guide to look");
- slowness, when working on a dial-up connection.

Feedback about the LO tools received from lecturers and student of the other two courses that participated in the pilot was also primarily positive. These courses used one of the LO tools each, and found them easy to use.

Students pointed out, however, that the nature of the LO tools needs to be well understood for them to be able to take better advantage of their functionality in the context of the course.

Interesting comments were made by students of all three courses about the nature of the new tools. Students pointed out that each of the LO tools was useful for some tasks, but not others, and made suggestions about how these tools should or should not be used. For example, they suggested that neither online journals, nor group web sites should be used as communication tools. Wiki, according to some students, did not work as a "presentation tool for a live audience". These comments highlight the importance of choosing the right tool for the task. Online journals, for instance, similar to traditional journals, are more suitable for personal

reflection, making notes and keeping records, rather than for group discussions. Comments made by students in this action research project show that the use of online tools, such as wiki and blogs, encouraged students to think critically not only about the technology they used, but also about the learning process they were engaged in, and what they needed to do to achieve their goals.

Based on the results of the pilot, the Learning Objects tools have been enabled in all Blackboard courses. At the end of the course, the LO web sites produced by students can be exported out of Blackboard and turned into stand-alone web sites. One way to take advantage of this functionality would be to create an online portfolio of resources produced by students themselves and add them to your public website. This would add a real-life outcome to the assessment task student are required to do in their course.