

CHALKDUST

Volume 6 Issue 1, August 2007

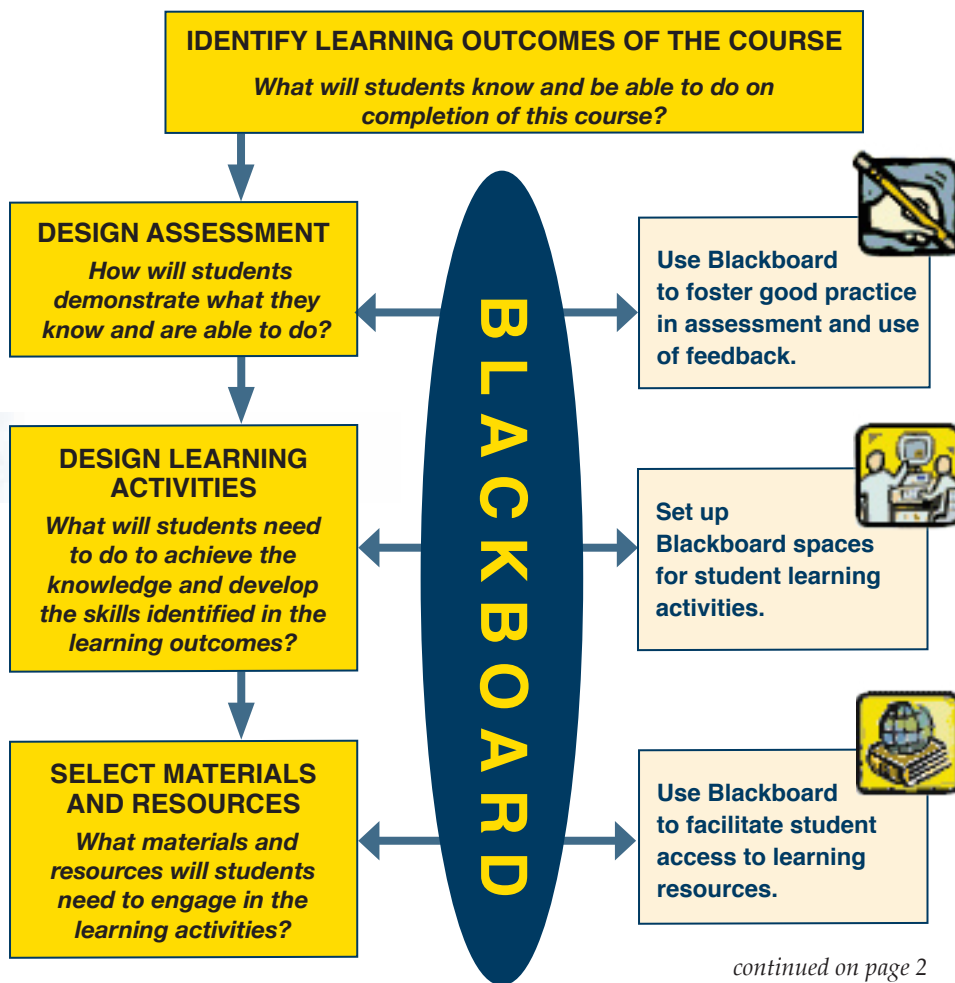
USING BLACKBOARD TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

Blackboard provides a suite of online tools that can be used to support learning and teaching. Effective use of Blackboard depends crucially on sound course design. This article offers advice on effective use of Blackboard in line with the Victoria University Pathways to Success initiative.

In This Issue...

- Using Blackboard to enhance student learning 1
- Blackboard courses over the mid-trimester break 1
- Learning collaboration across the ocean 3
- Blackboard tips 4
- EdTech Seminars 4

Course Design Processes Flowchart



continued on page 2

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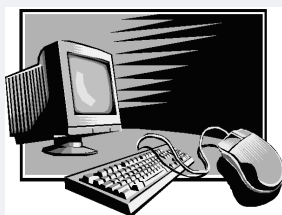
Blackboard courses over the mid-trimester break

Introduction to Teaching with Blackboard

Date: Wednesday 22 August
Time: 10:00 - 13:00
Venue: KK217 (Kirk/Kelburn Campus)

Using Blackboard for Assessment and Evaluation

Date: Wednesday 22 August
Time: 10:00 - 13:00
Venue: KK217 (Kirk/Kelburn Campus)



Comments and feedback on articles published in this newsletter are welcome and should be directed to Irina Elgort.





Use Blackboard to foster good practice in assessment and use of feedback.

Blackboard assessment tools have built-in mechanisms for providing students with timely individualised feedback on their work, while making it less time-consuming for the lecturer.

- Use anonymous surveys to establish what students already know about key concepts and topics covered in the course.

- Use anonymous surveys to make student expectations and beliefs explicit, so that they can be openly challenged if they are not aligned with the realities of the course.

- Use anonymous surveys early in the course to receive student feedback on the aspects of the course that you can and are willing to change, while the course is still running.

- Use Bb tests to give students immediate feedback on their understanding without having to mark their work.

- Use Bb tests to ask conceptual questions to help students reveal gaps in their understanding or ability to apply knowledge. Design test feedback to support and promote student learning.

- Use Bb tests to give students opportunities to practice memorisation, repetition and retrieval of information – learning activities that do not require interaction with others.

- Use the Bb assignment tool to reduce assessment anxiety by clearly recording the time of submission and allowing students to inspect the submitted work. Students can also see their individual marks and class averages for each assignment as soon the assignment has been marked.

- When using the Bb assignment tool, feedback can be provided in the form of a summary, an attached document (for example, a marking grid) or a marked-up copy of the original assignment (for example, using the track changes option). Legibility of feedback provided electronically is superior to written feedback, which is particularly important for non-native speaking students.

What not to do: Do not use Blackboard tests for summative assessment which is worth a significant percentage of the overall course mark.



Set up Blackboard spaces for student learning activities.

A learning activity involves interaction between the learner and environment, leading to a planned learning outcome.

- Use online journals (blogs) to put the emphasis on a student's personal voice while enabling teacher and peer feedback. Use tasks that facilitate critical and reflective thinking.

- Use group websites (wiki), to give students a shared space to work collaboratively towards a joint outcome, and to negotiate incorporating the work of individual students into a joint product.

- Use discussion forums to develop student skills in communicating and defending a point of view, debating a burning issue, or challenging an approach.

What not to do: Do not expect students to use Blackboard discussion forums if these forums simply duplicate what students already do in tutorials.



Use Blackboard to facilitate student access to learning resources.

A Blackboard site can include a wide variety of text and multimedia resources, but lecturers who plan to use multimedia resources must establish whether their students have computer and network capabilities to access these resources.

- Use Blackboard to give students access to pre- and post-lecture/tutorial readings, questions, and tasks.

- Use Blackboard to distribute summaries or key points of lectures.

- Use Blackboard to teach students to evaluate the quality of information, select information that is fit for purpose, interpret and adapt information, understand principles of academic integrity.

What not to do: Do not upload the complete content of lectures to Blackboard prior to the lecture, unless Blackboard is the primary mode of lecture delivery in the course.

Other good practice tips on using Blackboard

- **What students do matters the most.** Design the course website to support learning activities that help students achieve intended learning outcomes.

- **Less is more.** In Blackboard, only enable relevant functions and tools. Follow the flow chart above to establish what aspects of the course will be supported through Blackboard.

- Students need to **make connections between class and independent learning activities.** Design the course website to enable a more organic flow between lectures, tutorial and independent course work. Use Blackboard to make the links between what students do in the course and the identified learning outcomes explicit.

- **Prompt and effective feedback contributes to success in University study.** Use Blackboard to diversify forms of interaction and feedback. When giving feedback in Blackboard, you have a choice of providing feedback to the whole class, small groups or to individual students.

Asia Pacific and Australian Run-Ups to Annual Learning Impact Competition

The IMS Global Learning Consortium has announced special opportunities to enter the 2008 Learning Impact Awards (LIA) and Recognition program in the Asia Pacific region.

The Learning Impact Awards symbolise the use of technology to support or enhance learning, featuring the highest levels of innovation, adoption, and evidence of improved learning. Through partnerships with the Department of Education, Science, and Training Australia and the New Zealand Ministry of Education, special regional competitions will be held in which the winners will be entered as finalists in the global 2008 LIA competition. To enter, visit <http://www.imsglobal.org/learningimpact2008/li2008submissionregional.cfm>.

LEARNING COLLABORATION ACROSS THE OCEAN

Online learning does not need to be technically complex or resource-intensive in order to be successful. Often what defines success in online learning practices is a clear understanding of objectives. One example of such a successful teaching and learning initiative has been provided recently by a Victoria course – Indigenous Writing in English.

One of the main drivers behind the decision of the two lecturers, Alice Te Punga Somerville from Victoria and Nadine Attewell from Macalester, USA, to set up a collaborative online student activity was to give the students a sense of belonging to a world community of people interested in issues related to indigenous literature.

Mixed groups of 4-5 students were created to include students from both universities. The lecturers took great care in putting these groups together, getting students to work with less familiar members of their class and with students from the other university while taking every effort to ensure that students felt comfortable working in their groups. Gender, ethnicity and prior experience were all taken into account when forming the collaborative groups.

The collaborative task consisted of two parts, one week each, with a week's break between these parts. Each group was given a poem by a Hawaiian author. Hawaiian poetry was chosen because it linked well with both courses, as one course had a focus on indigenous American literature, and the other on Pacific literature, and because it was new to both New Zealand and US students.

Blackboard was used as an online environment for this collaborative group activity. External student accounts were created for the Macalester students participating in the collaborative task. Group discussion boards were set up as part of the Blackboard course website to allow groups of students to work on their poems in a secure environment – only group members and the lecturers had access to individual group discussions. On the other hand,

announcements, information and instructions were published through the main Blackboard course website, and were visible to all students.

Students were instructed to first introduce themselves in their groups. They were given some ideas about what to include into their introductory message, for example, information about where they were from and where they were 5 years prior to the course, the favourite text they have read for this course so far, a major sport or other event they would like to win tickets for, other subjects they were studying as part of their degree. These ideas were there to help students select 'safe' information about themselves to share with the group in the context of a university course.

The focus of the first part of the collaborative activity was on the discussion of the poem assigned to the group. Again, student discussions were scaffolded by giving them certain points to focus on, e.g., elements of the poem that drew their attention, in terms of both form and meaning. Students were required to submit at least two posts during this discussion. They were encouraged to ask follow-up questions about the individual interpretations of the poem posted by other group members. The first part of the task was not assessed but was presented as a course requirement.

The second part of the collaborative task focused on students' experiences of the discussion in part one. Students were encouraged to reflect on three aspects of their interactions: (1) their personal connection with the poem (personal experiences or knowledge that affected the reading); (2) the context in which they encountered the poem (e.g., the context of the course, institutional context, etc.); and (3) relationship between the poem they discussed and other readings done in the course. This part of the collaborative assignment was assessed, but only a small proportion of the overall course mark was allocated to it. However, students were informed that they had to treat this task as a warm up exercise for one of their major course assignments,

in which they were instructed to pick up and further develop some of the themes from the second part of the task – the group reflection.

WHAT WORKED ...

Although both parts of the task went well, the second part in which students reflected on the differences of their interpretations and the reasons for these differences was perceived both by the students and lecturers as the highlight of the collaborative activity. Looking back at their group discussions about the poem, students noticed how their personal beliefs and background knowledge, as well as the instructional and institutional context affected their reading of the poem. Students' reflections demonstrated high-level conceptual thinking when dealing with the issues of diversity and indigenous literature. Cultural differences became apparent when reasons for different readings were considered in the groups. The students experienced critical thinking and appreciative enquiry in practice, using their own writing submitted to the discussion boards in the first part of the task.

Even the most general observations of the effects of this collaborative activity showed that the 'quiet' students who had been somewhat reluctant to participate in tutorial discussions at the beginning of the course, were more inclined to share their views in class having participated in the online small-group discussions. It appears that an opportunity to present their own interpretations of the poem in the safe environment of a small group and to reflect on the reasons for the differences in their interpretations of the same material positively affected the willingness of these 'quiet' students to participate in face-to-face tutorial discussions.



continued on page 4

BLACKBOARD TIPS

Over the mid-year break Blackboard and the accompanying software were upgraded to the latest versions, which includes some new features. The most notable highlights of this upgrade are:

Blogs and Wikis

- Blogs (online journals) and wikis (editable group websites) have a new modern look and feel, and include a search option.
- Blogs include: an interactive calendar; recent posts, archives and RSS feeds.
- Wikis feature improved navigation and a listing of all page contributors.
- Course blogs and wikis can be set up for the whole class, or for individual students or groups.

Discussion Boards

- It is possible for students and instructors to subscribe to discussion threads and receive email notification when a new message is added.
- Users can search for a word or phrase in a specific discussion forum or across all course forums.
- Messages can now be flagged.
- Instructors can enable the option for students to rate each other's posts.
- Instructors and students can generate overviews of all posts in to a discussion forum using the collect option, and sort them by author, date, subject or thread.

Tests and Surveys

- A 'hot spot' question type has been added, which allows instructors to upload an image into a quiz and ask a question that requires students to click on a pre-defined hot-spot within that image.
- Other useful new question types include 'fill in multiple blanks' and 'jumbled sentence'.
- A 'Likert scale' question type can now be used in surveys.
- Survey results can be downloaded as comma- or tab-delimited text files, and opened in other applications (such as Excel) for further analysis.

EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY SEMINARS



In July UTDC hosted three EdTech seminars by external presenters. These seminars were part of the eCDF (e-learning collaborative development fund) series.

The topic of the first seminar was an *Authoring Intelligent Tutoring System* (ASPIRE) developed by a group of computer scientists at the University of Canterbury. ASPIRE is freely available on the Internet to all tertiary institutions within New Zealand (<http://aspire.cosc.canterbury.ac.nz>).

Primary contact: Dr Tanja Mitrovic
(Tanja.Mitrovic@canterbury.ac.nz).

The second seminar was on *eTools to help lecturers mark assignments*. This

For resources and ideas on using technology for learning and teaching visit
WikiEducator
http://www.wikieducator.org/Main_Page
NZ eLearning Guidelines
<http://elg.massey.ac.nz/>

seminar was based on a year-long study led by researchers at Massey University. Information about this project, as well as useful resources and advice can be found on the Innovations in Assignment Marking webiste (<http://etools.massey.ac.nz>).

Primary contact: Dr Eva Heinrich
(e.heinrich@massey.ac.nz).

The third seminar introduced *Tools for Delivering Scenario-based eLearning*. These tools are freely available to all public tertiary institutions, and a copy of the kit is held in the VUW Library. A CD with 16 exemplar scenarios in a variety of subject disciplines created using the tools can be obtained by contacting Irina Elgort. Project website: <http://pbl.massey.ac.nz>

Primary contact: Dr Terry Stewart
(T.Stewart@massey.ac.nz).

The last two seminars in this series were recorded. To borrow a CD please contact Irina Elgort.

LEARNING COLLABORATION ACROSS THE OCEAN

continued from page 3

Last but not least, enrolment numbers in courses that deal with indigenous writing are generally low, both in New Zealand and overseas. Students taking these courses often feel isolated, and an opportunity to connect with other students doing similar courses overseas may help overcome this feeling, creating a broader context for indigenous issues and a sense of community of like-minded individuals across cultures and borders.

WHAT CAN BE DONE DIFFERENTLY IN THE FUTURE...

Although the lecturers think the collaborative activity went really well and was definitely worthwhile, there is always room for improvement. One of the things that the lecturers decided to do in this course was to form their own small group, select a poem and engage in the same collaborative activity as their

students. They were intending to make their own discussion accessible to the students to provide an example for those who might have been nervous or unsure about their lecturers' expectations. The problem was that, although the lecturers thought their discussion was open to the students, in fact, this discussion took place in the locked area of the website, and students could not see it. Having learned that using a course blog would enable students to follow their lecturers' interpretations, discussion and reflections, and even to comment on their entries, the lecturers decided that a blog would be used for their own activity in the future.

It has also been suggested that a higher proportion of the final mark should be assigned to this collaborative group task to more accurately represent its value for the course.