

Using the Blackboard—Online

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Since the early 1800s, the blackboard has been used as a teaching tool to display and to store information. Now with the use of Web component software, that concept with much more is available online. This paper will provide an overview of one product—*Blackboard CourseInfo*—and how it is being used as an online component for traditional college courses and a distance education course offered at Ohio University—Southern.

Blackboard CourseInfo

Blackboard CourseInfo provides a teaching and learning environment that can be used as an educational component for traditional courses or as a method for distance education. *Blackboard CourseInfo* software provides buttons as links to numerous sections, such as Announcements, Staff Information, Documents, Assignments, Communication, External Links, and Student Tools. (See Figure 1.) Accessing information is as easy as point and click in this user-friendly environment.

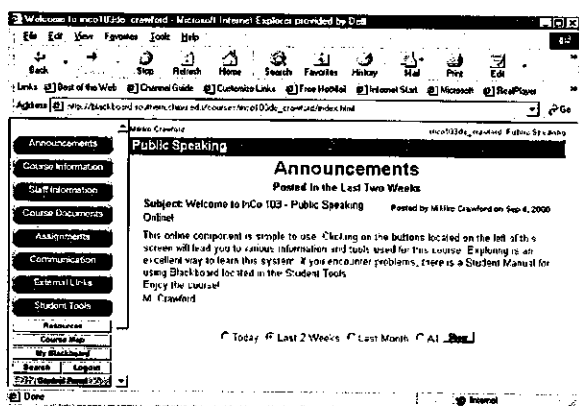


Figure 1. Screenshot of *Blackboard CourseInfo*

Course management can be almost easy for instructors—no html is necessary. *Word*, *Excel*, *PowerPoint*, and audio and video clips can be uploaded to a site and viewed by students. Instructors manage the site through a control panel that not only assists in placing information online but also provides customized features for the course, allows information to be enabled or disabled, tracks and reports course statistics, provides feedback to online tests, offers an online gradebook, and more. Instructors have numerous options for utilizing *Blackboard* as a course component. It can be used simply to post a course syllabus, or it can become the medium for the entire course.

Traditional Course Use Of Blackboard

Lacey Curtis uses *Blackboard* to post class announcements, syllabus, and course documents. This procedure can supply an important storehouse of information, especially for classes meeting only once a week. Using *Blackboard* as a component for a traditional courses provides students with reinforcement and models technology as a pedagogical tool.

Students' Perceptions Of Blackboard

At the end of the spring 1999 quarter, Curtis' students were asked to complete a survey consisting of 11 Likert scale items and one open-ended item for comments. The open-ended item provided an opportunity for students to address areas of concern and/or to submit any comments. There were a total of 77 students from three education classes who participated in this survey. The Likert scale response selections follow:

1. Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral, 4. Disagree, and 5. Strongly Disagree.

The following table provides the evaluation items and percentages of student responses.

Table 1

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree; n = 77; 3 classes

Blackboard Course Inof Survey	%	%	%	%	%
Lacey Curtis' Classes	SA	A	N	D	SD
I had a difficult time learning how to use Blackboard.			2	97	1
I feel comfortable accessing and using Blackboard now.	45	55			
I possessed the computer skills necessary for using Blackboard.	95	5			
Access to Blackboard is a problem for me.		7	13	80	
Using Blackboard enhances my learning.		35	60	5	
Having course documents online is convenient.	95	5			
Blackboard is beneficial as a reinforcement of class content.	95	5			
Blackboard is beneficial as a communication tool.	97	3			
I have used Blackboard to socialize with others.			15	45	30
I have computer and Internet access from home.	95			5	
I use Blackboard frequently.	7	83	5	5	

Examples Of Students' Comments

- "It's great. I like being connected to the instructor!"
- "I haven't used it much, but I think I will."
- "When I lost my syllabus, I could print one from the Web site."
- "I like the fact I can use it from home."
- "I hope you add more material to your next one—pictures, additional sources."
- "Could you add our grades and possible sample test questions?"
- "I feel it helped when I had to miss class. I could e-mail you and have you tell me what I missed."
- "*Blackboard* is good to have especially since so many of the other

instructors are using it, too.”

Uses For *Blackboard* In A Public Speaking Distance Education Course

The U.S. Department of Education recently announced that distance education programs increased by 72 percent from 1995 to 1998 (Carnevale A57). Technology has blown open the doors to education, and we are beginning to see “a shift from the classroom as the primary place for organized instruction to the World Wide Web as the center of instruction” (Boettcher in Young A51). To maintain the instructional classroom level online, a balance of discussion, reading, and other activities are needed.

Blackboard is being used as such a component for Miki Crawford’s distance education public speaking course. Videotaped sessions provide a lecture series while *Blackboard CourseInfo* provides anytime, anywhere access to the traditional paper and communication portions of the course. Distance learners view videotapes or watch the telesession broadcasts on the campus’ cable channel. The syllabus, *PowerPoints* outlining each chapter, announcements, and other course documents are readily available online. To complete the speech-making process, each distance learner presents his or her speech in front of an audience, videotapes each speech, and sends the tape to the instructor for evaluation and comments.

Communication is an essential component for today’s distance learners, as indicated by research: “Focusing on building collaboration and group interaction may be more important than focusing on individual participation” (Hanson 31). *Blackboard CourseInfo* provides the means for group interaction through threaded discussions, e-mail, and online chats. Having contact with other students during courses can be motivating and provide an outlet for socialization for distance learners.

To date, five out of seven students have completed the public speaking course through *Blackboard*. Crawford advises students that they need to be highly motivated and self-directed before they enroll in this course. Those students who have been actively participating online have been the students who continue their progress in the coursework. Their perceptions of *Blackboard* are charted below.

Table 2

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree; n = 5

Blackboard Course Inof Survey	%	%	%	%	%
Distance Education Public Speaking	SA	A	N	D	SD
I had a difficult time learning how to use Blackboard.				60	40
I feel comfortable accessing and using Blackboard now.	80	20			
I possessed the computer skills necessary for using Blackboard.	60	40			
Access to Blackboard is a problem for me.				20	80
Using Blackboard enhances my learning.	20	60		20	
Having course documents online is convenient.	80	20			
Blackboard is beneficial as a reinforcement of class content.	60	40			
Blackboard is beneficial as a communication tool.	80	20			
I have used Blackboard to socialize with others.	20	40	20	20	
I have computer and Internet access from home.	100				
I use Blackboard frequently.	20	60		20	

Distance Education Students' Comments

- "I graduated from Virginia Tech, and as high tech as VT is, I never came across a system that integrated with the classroom so well. I am very impressed with the *Blackboard* system."
- "For distance learning, *Blackboard* served as the central communication tool for the class. It was very user-friendly and easily accessible."
- "I like it! Many instructors do not use it or do not follow through with what they say."
- "I really like it. Helps me keep in contact with teacher and other students."
- "Positively glad that class has finished."

Addressing Faculty And Student Barriers

Faculty are often reluctant to employ new technologies for various reasons. Learning to use and using new technologies is time-consuming and often without incentives or payment for the time faculty invest. Technology is costly, and the availability of equipment is often a barrier to many faculty members. Faculty who do have access to equipment often find that training is not readily available or they do not have the technical support needed for a smooth transition into using technology.

The dean at Ohio University—Southern was impressed with *Blackboard* when it was selected for use as the online software at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. Dean Dingus wanted to encourage the faculty to use *Blackboard* as an online component for courses provided by the Southern Campus. Monetary incentives were offered to faculty who used *Blackboard* during the winter quarter. Hands-on training sessions were scheduled during the fall-winter break and an on-campus support person was identified. Additionally, one-on-one training was available to faculty members who requested it. The system administrator played an active role to insure that *Blackboard* software and Internet connections were working properly. In short, using this technology required coordination and cooperation from several departments.

Barriers to student access were also considered, and steps were implemented to help students gain access and learn to navigate in their online course components. Computer lab hours were extended, lab assistants were given *Blackboard* training, and credited workshops were created for students. Online access was made available in all the computer labs on campus, and students who had Internet connections from home could log on anytime. With numerous instructors using this online tool, students were gaining constant reinforcement in the use of this online software.

According to Jed Utsinger, the system administrator at the Southern Campus, there were a total of 148 courses (160 sections) using *Blackboard* during the first quarter that it was available. Seventy percent of the students enrolled in the winter quarter had at least one course offering information via *Blackboard* (Utsinger 2000).

Conclusion

While many students and faculty members have expressed positive attitudes and experiences using *Blackboard*, the courses using *Blackboard* from winter to spring quarter dropped from 148 to 113 (Utsinger, 2000). There are still issues to address, such as the time and effort needed for the successful use of the technology. Updating online course materials, answering additional e-mail, checking threaded messages, and so on, require a considerable amount of time. Some faculty members, however, feel that it is worth the effort and expanded their use of *Blackboard* by adding additional courses and using more of its features. The use of such technology helps prepare students for real life skills needed in their careers, and that makes the effort worthwhile.

More than 3,300 colleges, schools, companies, and associations are using *Blackboard* for e-learning (electronic learning). Information about *Blackboard* can be obtained from the company's website at <http://www.blackboard.com>, where numerous links to online courses and resources are available. Also, an opportunity to create a trial online course for firsthand experience with this Web-component software is accessible from the company's homepage.

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Biographies

Miki Ward Crawford has earned a B.S. in Education from Ohio University, an M.A. in Communication Arts from Marshall University, and a Ph. D. in Higher Education from Ohio University. She has taught interpersonal communication courses at Ohio University—Southern for seven years. Her research interests are distance education and service learning. She may be reached by e-mail at crawford@ohio.edu.

Lacey S. Curtis is an assistant professor at Ohio University—Southern, where she has taught courses in women studies and education. Her research interests are incorporating service learning experiences in university courses and increasing the use of technology with pre-service teachers. She may be contacted by e-mail at curtisl@ohio.edu.