

Making the Transition From WebCT to Blackboard Learn v9.1

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BACKGROUND

The learning environment has changed with the World Wide Web. Learners that were once confined to the traditional classroom and time limitations can now access online courses that facilitate collaborative learning and flexibility. Technology is used for delivering education. However the selection of the technology and software to be used is based on the needs and objectives of the online programs and its students. Facilitating and establishing an online learning

community, and creating a course that will promote active learning experiences necessitate specific components that will accomplish these objectives. Many institutions are using various learning management systems to create the different active learning experiences needed in an online course. WebCT was acquired by Blackboard in 2005 and clients using this learning management system must seek alternative technological solutions as Blackboard will be retiring WebCT in January 2013 (Feldstein, 2010). This paper addresses the differences between WebCT 4.1 and Blackboard Learn 9.1 and how an instructor can make that transition from WebCT to Blackboard focusing on building an online learning community and designing an engaging, interactive online course.



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WEBCT COURSEWARE

WebCT was originally developed at the University of British Columbia by a faculty member in computer science, Murray Goldberg. WebCT is significant in that it was the world's first widely successful course management system for higher education. Web course tools (WebCT) is an online medium that facilitates the learning process in an environment that is accessible and on demand. This environment is available 24 hours daily. It may be used as the full medium by which a course is taught or it may be used to supplement a

class taught mostly face-to-face (Nova Southeastern University, 2011).

Each WebCT course has a directory (folder) called My Files. This is an area that allows faculty to upload and store all the files for the online course and is inaccessible to the students. Once the files are uploaded, the instructor creates links to the files within the course, which is then accessible for the students. Faculty can create multiple links to the same file and if a change is made, it will affect all instances of the file within the course. Content such as PowerPoint, html documents, or URLs are linked to icons within the course, which enables the students to access the materials. WebCT also enable faculty to make their courses unique by creating customized banners, backgrounds, and images.

BLACKBOARD LEARN 9.1

Blackboard was founded in 1997 and develops, licenses, and supports enterprise software applications for the global education market. As its site indicates,

Blackboard works with our clients to develop and implement technology that improves every aspect of education. We enable clients to engage more students in exciting new ways, reaching them on their terms and devices—and connecting more effectively, keeping students informed, involved, and collaborating together. Through this innovative technology, services and expertise we work with our clients to build a better education experience. (Blackboard, 2011a)

A blackboard course has an interface of a course menu and content frames. Faculty are able to upload course materials into their courses such as PowerPoint presentations, Word documents, and PDF documents. Blackboard accommodates text, graphics, audio and video. Working in the course, users are able to navigate within the course using the course menu and/or

click on the trail link to return to the previous page. The course menu houses the links to the various content areas, tools, and pages within the course.

DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF ONLINE COURSES

Courses designed for an online environment require an instructor to plan ahead as well as ensure that the content is based on the desired learning outcomes and objectives. It is essential that the instructor takes the time to plan and organize the learning experience when engaged in teaching at a distance (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009). The online curriculum should focus on higher-level learning (critical thinking, assessment and evaluation, application to the real world, and synthesis across the curriculum) and provide opportunities for the exchange and critique of ideas among students and with the educator (Lewis, MacEntee, & Youngs-Maher, 2002).

As the faculty are planning and designing the content, it is also necessary to identify the appropriate medium that will address the various learning styles. Therefore, faculty must identify the technology that will be used to present the material and ensure that it will be equally accessible to all the learners. Faculty also need to ensure that the learners are aware of any technical resources that are available when needed.

Having created the content for the online course, it is now time to place the content in the Blackboard environment. A Blackboard course would have already been created and the faculty able to access it. It is at this time that faculty must begin designing and creating an interactive and engaging online course. This can be done by using specific tools within Blackboard. Faculty can present their content using different options depending on the desired learning outcome. If a faculty desires to have all of the weekly activities within one

area including content, discussions and assignments, then a folder can be created. This allows faculty to give a very detailed description of the content in the folder and it can be set to be available in a timed manner if desired as well or be available throughout the semester. Faculty can also create subfolders within the folder but must be conscious of arranging content in an easy-to-follow path so that there is not excessive clicking to access the desired folder. If the faculty desire to have the material be displayed in a table of content format, then the learning module would be the tool to use. A learning module can either be sequential or nonsequential. Word documents, PowerPoint Presentations, videos, audio, graphics, and links to external websites can all be added within the content areas. Additionally, links to assignments, assessments, forums and other resources can all be added in folders as well as the learning module.

Designing and creating content for a learner-centered approach requires faculty to think creatively. When learners lack the confidence that they will be able to master the course content, their motivation drops and they are less likely to persist in their efforts to grasp new material (Simonson et al., 2009). Information should also be given in appropriate chunks so as not to overwhelm the student and keep it simple.

In addressing the different learning styles of the students, and wanting to motivate them enough to take ownership of their learning, an instructor may decide to incorporate videos, links to external websites and audio within the content. This can be done by accessing the content area and, from the build content icon, make the desired selection, which can be an audio, image, video or a URL.

BUILDING AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

An online learning community is a place designed to help users achieve learning

goals of some sort through collaborative partnerships, including varying degrees of social networking and Internet-based and computer-mediated communication (Doe, 2010). Faculty can create online learning communities using the various tools within Blackboard such as the discussion boards, wikis, blogs, content management, e-mails, audio and video.

Making the transition from WebCT to Blackboard, faculty are exposed to new tools that are available to build an online learning community. Wanting to establish a social presence, it is necessary to combine strategies and use the tools within the learning management system. Boettcher and Conrad (2010) identify three tips on how to build an online community: promote peer interaction and community with learner-to-learner dialogue, promote peer interaction and community, and promote meaningful dialogue and questioning. Using the synchronous and asynchronous collaboration tools within Blackboard would promote and build an online learning community and encourage interactivity.

ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

The discussion board, an asynchronous collaboration tool, is heavily used for both instruction as well as interaction within the learning management system. Keramidis, Ludlow, Collins, and Baird (2007) state that discussions are often integral to the learning process in online courses and offer the following strategies to increase quantity of posts and quality of responses:

- make expectations clear for participation;
- set timelines for discussion;
- establish a separate discussion for off-topic comments (the blog tool within Blackboard can be used with this strategy);
- use questions to link to updated content;

- use group activities within discussion; and
- be creative in discussion formats.

Faculty applying these strategies using the discussion board and the blog tools would be facilitating a social and learning environment. Within the Blackboard course, faculty can access the discussion board from the course menu, then select the create forum icon. Using the text box editor, a description of the topic or question to be answered will be entered. There are many additional settings available within the forum settings that assist the faculty to accomplish the desired objectives.

The blog is another tool within Blackboard that can be used for asynchronous communication and building an online learning community. This tool promotes peer interaction and community. The blog, when used for group projects, is beneficial for students as they are able to collaborate meaningfully with their peers as they work on their projects. It allows for a more informal and conversational exchange of ideas amongst the students.

Faculty are introduced to a new feature that was not in existence in WebCT. The wiki tool not only allows for collaboration among the students but can also be used for instructional purposes. Using the wiki, students are able to share content and exchange ideas with their peers. Creating a wiki can be done by accessing the Blackboard course, and then from the course menu, creating a tool link by selecting the wiki option. Having successfully done that there will now be a wiki link on the course menu. Select the wiki page, and create the wiki. Additionally, there are options that allow for editing and sharing comments. Faculty can give feedback during the creation of the wiki and then grade the wikis upon completion.

Students at a distance are separated from the faculty, and this requires that the students take more responsibility for their

learning. The instructor is more in a role of a facilitator in this learner-centered environment and as the students progress through the course, constant feedback and communication is required. This lends itself to the faculty establishing an online presence and building that learning online community. Faculty can use the following tools within Blackboard for one-on-one communication and feedback to the students: e-mail and course messages and the My Grades tool. E-mail allows faculty to communicate through an external e-mail account to the students. Course messages are used within the Blackboard course and students must access the course to retrieve and respond to any messages received. There are no alerts for any new messages received and it is important that the faculty encourages students to check their course messages on a regular basis. The My Grades tool is another method in which an instructor can give immediate feedback to the students, who in turn can monitor their progress throughout the course. As faculty respond to assignments and discussion postings, these comments can be viewed in the My Grades area and is only seen by the individual student. These tools were also available in WebCT with the same functionalities.

SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

Synchronous communication is communication between the faculty and students in a real-time virtual environment. During these chats, participants can look at PowerPoint presentations, websites, or even streaming video while they are chatting (Texley & Adelstein, 2006).

Synchronous modes, because they must be delivered in real time, offer the immediacy of a live class session, but not the convenience of on-demand learning (Keramidas et al., 2007). Faculty are able to remedy this situation by archiving the live sessions and making them available to the students. These recorded sessions can also

serve as a study tool even for those who did attend the live sessions.

The use of the synchronous tool can also be used as a method of delivering instruction and content, thus appealing to the visual learner. Faculty can distribute the PowerPoint presentations ahead of the live session, or a full text outline of the topic to be discussed, which will reduce the need for note-taking and fostering greater attention to what is being displayed on the screen (Keramidas et al., 2007).

The synchronous tool within Blackboard is the text chat, which can be conducted in two formats: one as a virtual text chat and the other as a virtual classroom. One example of using the virtual text chat is that it allows an instructor to conduct office hours at the time designated by the instructor. The students will then be able to access this online text chat room and be able to ask questions, interact, and receive immediate feedback. The virtual classroom, which is also text based, is used when the instructor needs to share more information, such as links to websites; students can submit individual questions in the inbox that can be answered by the instructor. The instructor can navigate within the course and give detailed instructions or answers as needed.

SUMMARY

As faculty understand the various tools and their uses within Blackboard, they relate with the way those tools were used in WebCT. Now, they must now implement and use the relevant tools in their new Blackboard course. Here is a brief summary of the uses of the tools discussed and their uses for the delivery of content and building an online learning community.

CREATING CONTENT

Folders are used for organizing and structuring content in a content area or learning module. Subfolders can be created.

Folders can be nested. Folders should be organized in a way that students are able to access them with the least number of clicks.

LEARNING MODULE

This tool allows instructors to organize information in a table of content format. Course materials can be displayed in a forced sequential order or in a non-sequential order.

THE DISCUSSION BOARD

This tool is used for collaboration and communication among students and for building an online learning community. It consists of forums that may be linked throughout the course but is mainly located in the discussion board tool. Students in groups can communicate privately among themselves.

WIKIS

A wikis is a collaborative tool that allows students to contribute and modify one or more pages of course-related materials, providing a means of sharing and collaboration. Pages can be created and edited quickly, while tracking changes and additions, allowing for effective collaboration between multiple writers. The instructor can create one or more wikis for all course members to contribute to, and wikis for specific groups to use to collaborate. Wikis can also be used to record information and serve as a repository for course information and knowledge (Blackboard help, 2011).

BLOGS

A blog is an area where students enrolled in the course are able to express their ideas in a more informal setting, and gives insights to students' activities. It allows the students to share knowledge and materials collected (Blackboard, 2011a). The blog usually consist of two elements: entries, which can be text, images,

links, multimedia, and attachments; and comments, which are remarks or responses to the blog entries.

E-MAIL

This tool enables faculty to communicate one-on-one with the student. E-mail is sent externally to an e-mail account provided by the student. It allows for feedback and more personal contact with the student.

COURSE MESSAGES

This tool is very similar to the e-mail tool except that it is an e-mail sent within the Blackboard environment and is stored within the course as well. Students must log in to the Blackboard course to retrieve and answer any of the course messages.

MY GRADES

This tool allows students to monitor their progress throughout the course. As instructor gives comments, it is usually shown in the My Grades area.

CHAT

This tool allows students to participate in real-time sessions and can be archived. The archives serve as a study tool as well as it can be viewed by those who were unable to attend. Faculty can use for office hours and be able to interact meaningfully with students. Two types of chats are available: virtual classroom (allows access to the Web, engage in question and answer sessions, use whiteboard) and chat.

Transitioning from WebCT to Blackboard will require some time and effort from faculty. However, since they have used WebCT and are familiar with the concept and the tools used for online teaching, it will be easy to relate and make that connection with Blackboard. Faculty will also

be appreciative of the new tools such as the blogs and wikis, which will be an asset and allow them to truly build an online learning community.

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