

CREATING ON-LINE GRADUATE RESOURCES WITH BLACKBOARD

AUTHORS:

Dr. Sandra Ratcliff Daffron

Edward Webster

ABSTRACT

The creative use of distance-learning technology in graduate programs does not always require technology experts or instructional designers. This article explains how one faculty member and several graduate students at Western Washington University created three simple, but powerful on-line resources solely with the course management system Blackboard. Each day faculty and graduate students routinely use a Blackboard based distance-learning laboratory, a student support center, and a learning object repository. This article does not contain high technology buzzwords or pages of research; it does contain practical and achievable ideas that any professor can use to enhance any graduate program.

INTRODUCTION

A course management system (CMS) is a web-based portal through which distance learning (DL) instructors and students exchange materials, information, and ideas. Western Washington University (WWU) and many graduate universities nationwide use Blackboard, a popular CMS, to teach courses online. Blackboard allows the instructor to easily create their online classroom by customizing a pre-built default template. Each course site typically consists of course material areas, discussion forums, and group workrooms for the DL instructor to conduct class. The Blackboard administrator deletes these cyber course sites, used for one term with a fixed group of students, when the term is over. However, Blackboard has the flexibility to allow instructors to create a “course” for non-classroom activities, enroll “course” members as they choose and recycle this “course” term after term.

CONTINUING AND COLLEGE EDUCATION SUPPORT CENTER

The students in the Continuing and College Education (CCE) graduate program at WWU attend classes on both the main campus in Bellingham and a satellite campus in Everett, a Seattle suburb. Students are typically returning adults, busy with family and career obligations and many take most of their classes using with DL technology. Interaction with other students and instructors on the other campus is often limited to department-sponsored events, electronic newsletters, and informational e-mails.

It is common for a student on one campus to never meet or even know the names of most of their cohorts on the other campus. Students use telephone, e-mail, and postal letter for nearly all department communication and rarely visit the main campus department offices. It is a challenge for the faculty to build and maintain a sense of community among this time challenged geographically diverse student population.

The CCE program provides students with academic and learning resources in the form of books, pamphlets and multimedia in a common department office area. An office bulletin board is available for students to post messages to other students about selling books, tutoring help, etc. and for faculty to post photos of new students. Because of the satellite campus, DL classes and electronic communication the majority of CCE students see the department office just once or twice in their graduate career.

Will a cyber version of the department office created with Blackboard serve the diverse group of CCE students?

Blackboard offers several distinct advantages as a platform for just such a cyber resource center:

- The software is already in use and familiar to both students and instructors
- Access to the cyber resource center is secure and limited to the CCE program
- The cyber resource center can be easily maintained by CCE students themselves

A cyber resource center called the Continuing and College Education Support Center (CCESC) was created using Blackboard. However, the CCESC Blackboard course site is quite different from a traditional DL course site in two ways:

- Each term the same CCESC course site was recycled and reused
- Each term all current CCE students are added as members of the CCESC

“Chat rooms”, or discussion forums on a wide variety of non-class related topics helped all students communicate much easier; students frequently requested new chat rooms with different topics. A “Gallery” of photos, bios and contact information of all students and instructors helped everyone from both campuses put a “face with the name”. An easily navigated “Library” of CCE related electronic resources included:

- Web links to pertinent CCE and education websites

- CCE related articles and books organized by subject
- Help files for CCE course related software and technology
- Archive of CCE program forms, pamphlets and newsletters
- Archive of photos and materials from department events and symposiums

A single volunteer graduate student or independent study student easily maintained the CCESC each term. For virtually no cost, the CCESC enhanced the WWU CCE graduate student community, provided easy access to learning resources and served as a working example of using simple technology effectively.

CONTINUING AND COLLEGE EDUCATION RESOURCE CENTER

Instructors in the CCE program use computers to create a variety of electronic resources for both face-to-face (F2F) classes and DL classes including:

- Word processor files
- Slide presentation files
- Audio and video files
- Portable document format (PDF) files

However, the organization and cataloging process of these electronic resources for reuse in future courses is not as easy and straightforward as the creation process.

A Learning Object (LO) is any electronic resource used and reused in technology-enhanced education and DL; they differ from their paper-based counter parts in two significant ways:

- Learning Objects can be easily distributed to students at virtually no cost
- Learning Objects can be easily shared between instructors in different courses

Will CCE faculty share Learning Objects easier with an electronic resource center created with Blackboard?

The new Blackboard course site, the Continuing and College Education Resource Center (CCERC) was quite different from a typical Blackboard course site:

- Enrollment in the CCERC is limited to just WWU CCE faculty and staff
- Each term the CCERC course site was recycled and reused

Although a little confusing at first, adding LO files, with titles and descriptions to the CCERC was no different for CCE faculty from adding material to their individual Blackboard courses. But there is significant saving in effort by uploading the LO file to the CCERC just once, then easily copying it multiple times to future course sites with Blackboards copy utility.

To minimize confusion some simple rules regarding Learning Object submission to the CCERC were established:

- Submission of Learning Objects to the CCERC by CCE faculty was voluntary
- Learning Objects in the CCERC may be used by any CCE faculty in any course
- Learning Object titles and descriptions should be clear and concise
- Learning Object titles, descriptions and content should contain no specific course references
- Learning Objects should be organized by topic, not course
- Learning Objects should include author and creation date information

The wording of the title and description of the LO is especially important to minimize student confusion when the file is used again future courses. If desired, LO author information and creation dates may be hidden Blackboard meta-data fields for future reference by CCE faculty.

When a LO in the CCERC is needed in a new Blackboard course site, the LO itself, its title and description are all easily copied to the course site with a menu-driven Blackboard copy utility in one operation; no editing or alteration of the title is needed. Entire folders of LO files in the CCERC can also be copied to other Blackboard course sites with this same copy utility. For example, an entire folder in the CCERC containing a rich mix of URLs, documents and multimedia files on grant writing could be copied to any CCE Blackboard course site in one step.

The ease of copying LO files encourages CCE instructors to provide supplemental learning material to graduate students. The WWU CCE program is not a lock-step program and many students must use CCE concepts in current course work that they have not yet learned. For example, a CCE instructor can choose to copy the entire Learning Styles folder from the CCERC to their Blackboard course site to supplement a related discussion on Instructional Design. With minimal effort, the instructor has provided a rich mix of support material to enhance student learning.

Keeping all CCE course material in one secure location on the WWU server system and not solely on individual faculty computers enhances file security; a CCE graduate assistant archives the entire CCERC weekly for additional safety.

Skepticism of the technology and concerns for intellectual property often punctuate discussions about sharing electronic instructional materials among department faculty. The experimental use of Learning Objects by graduate faculty can be encouraged with a no-cost, easy to use Blackboard-based repository.

CONTINUING AND COLLEGE EDUCATION DISTANCE LEARNING LABORATORY

The traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom is the setting commonly used to teach instructional design theories and the fundamentals of facilitating effective distance learning. CCE graduate students supplement this classroom work with valuable “laboratory” work, designing, creating, and administering distance-learning exercises for fellow students. However, distance learning in the real world is quite different from the laboratory experience.

Learning institutions first exposure to distance learning is often in a setting where:

- Instructors have little or no extra time or expertise to prepare distance learning material
- Students have a variety of hardware and software problems and issues
- Both faculty and students are confused about what distance learning is and what it isn't

As part of the degree requirements for the WWU CCE program, students are required to complete eight-quarter hours of education related field experience. Many challenges faced the student pursuing a field experience in DL, as they could not:

- Learn from the distance learning experiences of other past field experience students
- Collaborate with fellow students on distance learning solutions and techniques
- Share lessons learned with future field experience students

Can a Blackboard-based cyber laboratory better prepare CCE students for careers in distance learning by collaborating with peers on real-world project?

A Blackboard course site was setup and named the Continuing and College Education Distance Learning Laboratory (CCEDLL); enrolled in this “course” were field experience students and their CCE faculty advisors. The elements of a physical laboratory are easy to visualize directly, the elements of this cyber laboratory are easier to visualize as analogies:

- Lab Building (Blackboard course site)
- Lab Resources (URLs, reference documents and multimedia)
- Lab Equipment (Software and document templates)
- Lab Bulletin Board (Blackboard discussion forums)
- Lab Archives (Electronic archive of past CCE student field experiences)
- Lab Instructor (CCE faculty supervising field experience project)
- Lab Assistant (CCE student volunteer to maintain the CCEDLL)
- Lab Students (CCE students conducting field experience work)

As with any CCE field experience, CCEDLL students researched, proposed, and completed a field experience with an area client in the business, education, or the non-profit sector. However, the CCE student's field experience must specifically involve some aspect of distance learning for enrollment in CCEDLL.

CCEDLL field experience clients have included WWU and area community college faculty, non-profit organizations and state agencies. Students collaborate on solutions for their clients and communicate with faculty advisors with CCEDLL discussion forums. Distance learning resources and materials as well as the CCE student's formal field experience paper are archived permanently each term on CCEDLL for use by future students. CCEDLL is recycled and reused each term so all resources and student work added to the cyber-lab will not be lost.

Often, the CCE student develops a client's online course using a separate Blackboard course site, enrolling the faculty advisor, the field experience client, and fellow CCEDLL students as "course" members. The faculty advisor and CCEDLL students provide feedback and advice on the development of the distance-learning course in message forums in CCEDLL; the client provides feedback and material via e-mail directly to the student.

The CCEDLL cyber laboratory is self-sustained by the resources and projects contributed by CCE students each term. A graduate assistant, a CCE student for academic credit or a CCE student volunteer, handle the cyber-lab maintenance duties each term.

Empowering CCE students to learn collaborate and share real-world distance learning theory and practice was the major goal of CCEDLL, in addition, faculty, and community clients all realize benefits of the cyber lab:

- Student: real-world distance learning experience with peer support
- Faculty: increased university and community exposure for department
- Client: enlightened assistance with distance learning development

The cyber laboratory requires no set-up cost and little faculty effort to sustain once established. The archive of student distance learning projects in CCEDLL provided a highly visible showcase for graduate student work and helped newer students develop even more innovative projects.

SUMMARY

The use of a course management system to teach graduate classes is well accepted. With a little imagination, some clear direction and lots of student effort this same course management system will produce innovative, no-cost, and fun on-line enhancements to any graduate program.