

Blackboard Tips, Tricks, and Suggestions for faculty

Here is a list of some things (**in no particular order**) you can do in your Blackboard course to improve your course layout and generally make your course better and more informative. These suggestions were gathered from UT Martin faculty members who have learned by trial and error what worked and didn't work for them, and also from the ITC staff who routinely train UT Martin faculty members on how to effectively utilize Blackboard.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and if you have additional suggestions that you would like to make, please let us know and we will endeavor to include them here. This document will be updated often, so feel free to send your suggestions along at any time.

1. There is an online Blackboard tutorial that students and faculty alike can use to improve their Blackboard skills. Instructors are encouraged to tell all their students about this tutorial and provide their students with the link to the tutorial. The tutorial can be seen by going to this URL:

<http://www.utm.edu/newcollege/bus/orientation/default.htm>

Or by going to UTM's homepage (<http://www.utm.edu/>) and clicking the Quicklinks dropdown list and choosing "blackboard.utm.edu", and then clicking on the link that says "Blackboard Online Orientation".

2. Encourage your students to change their login password and update their personal information inside Blackboard. Tell your students to take special note of the email address that is listed as their email address inside Blackboard. They should make sure that the email address listed there is the email address that they use most often. Detailed instructions on how to change your personal information is located in the Blackboard tutorial mentioned above.
3. Put a picture of yourself in the 'Staff Information' section, and put personal information about yourself in there too. Getting the students involved in the course is crucial to its success, and letting your students get to know you better helps to get them involved. Especially in a totally online course. Getting 'in-touch' with your students is even more important in that environment.
4. Require your students to put information in their 'Edit Your Homepage' section inside your course. Fostering 'community' in an online course environment is very important, so anything your students can do to get to know the other students helps to foster this.
5. Remove menu buttons that you do not use. Leaving buttons in your menu that are not used may cause your students unnecessary confusion. You can accomplish this by going to the Control Panel of your course, and then go to the Course Settings section, and then click on Area Availability. From this screen you can then decide which buttons you want to enable/disable. You also have a limited ability on this screen to reorder your buttons to suit your needs.

6. Set 'virtual office hours' for your course. That is... set aside a certain time period each week that your students know that you will be sitting in front of your computer if they need you. Most communication will probably be done via email messages back and forth, but having official office hours gives your students more direct access to you.

Another suggestion in regard to 'virtual office hours' is to install an instant-message program like MSN-Messenger (www.msn.com), AOL-Instant-Messenger (www.aol.com), or ICQ-Instant-Messenger (www.icq.com), and tell your students what your contact information is for those programs so they can get in touch with you that way. These programs are all free to download, and many of your students will probably already use these.

7. Create a Course Calendar that lists specific dates or 'milestones' in your course. This can easily be done by using a web page editor (such as FrontPage or Dreamweaver) to create an HTML document with a simple table with rows and columns. You can then upload this Course Calendar document to Blackboard.

Note: Blackboard has a feature called the Course Calendar that you can use for this purpose, but it is our opinion that a simple HTML table is far more useful than the Course Calendar built into Blackboard. Using a simple HTML table enables your students to visually see upcoming events in the course easier because all the information is listed sequentially on the screen.

8. Use the survey feature in the Blackboard Assessment Manager. By using a survey, you can gain feedback from your students on any topic that you want to ask them about. Survey questions are totally anonymous, so your students can share their true feelings and you can be assured of getting honest feedback. Some examples of the types of uses for surveys are: seeking feedback on the effectiveness of certain types of homework exercises, or seeking suggestions for course improvement.
9. Every time you create a new item of information inside Blackboard, you have the option of time-releasing that information to the students. This is helpful in that you can release assignments and course information as you go throughout the semester, instead of releasing all of it at the beginning of the semester.
10. When you use audio or video clips inside your course, provide a written transcript of exactly what is said in the audio/video clip. This is beneficial for those students who have a very slow internet connection and don't want to wait for the larger audio/video clips to download. Additionally, it is beneficial to those students who may be disabled in some fashion and use screen readers to obtain page content.
11. The first week of class is your opportunity to orient your students to using Blackboard. In some respects, this is the most critical time to get the students involved in your course and to help them overcome any anxiety or confusion they may have with Blackboard. In addition to orienting them on 'how' to use Blackboard (see item #1 above) you should orient your students on 'how' to use your course. The best way to accomplish this is to

create a 'lesson' that the students must complete the first week that instructs them on several things... such as: how to navigate around your course, where to find certain important items, what your objectives are for the course, how to communicate with you, what they can expect as far as workload and time commitments, etc.

This type of orientation will help the students get acclimated to your course environment and also, it will go a long way toward reducing the number of problems you have to deal with up front.

12. If you are going to require that students submit documents to you for homework assignments, projects, exams, and so forth, we recommend that you establish a naming-convention that all students must adhere to. This will save you many hours of headaches of having to run down documents and assignments and misplaced files. Be firm with this naming-convention and let the students know early on how important and serious it is that they follow it. We even go so far as to suggest that you not accept homework assignments unless the students follow your guidelines. All it will take is one 0 on an assignment for the student to follow the guidelines from that point forward.
13. Use consistent terminology when creating the structure of your course and when referring to that structure. If you call a certain item a 'lesson' in one location of your course, don't call it a 'chapter' in another part of the course. Use consistent terminology so your students don't get confused.
14. Use a consistent course layout. For example, if you have a folder structure for each 'unit' of instruction, and inside the 'week 1' folder you have an 'additional resources' folder that has additional course materials, then for the 'week 2' folder you need to have an 'additional resources' folder even if there is nothing to put in it. Just put a note inside the folder that says something along the lines of "this folder intentionally left blank." If you vary your layout/organization structure, the students will be confused and you will get persistent questions about whether something is missing or not.
15. Be firm when assigning deadlines. Let your students know early-on how serious you are about deadlines for assignments, projects, quizzes, exams, discussion board threads, etc. Procrastinating in an online-course environment is even easier than in a traditional face-to-face course because you don't have a live person there to remind you of what needs to be done and when. You must be firm in your expectations for deadlines, and you must be consistent in the application of those deadlines. Consider it tough-love.
16. You will undoubtedly receive many questions from your students requesting technical assistance on literally dozens of issues regarding Blackboard and even on technology issues not related to your course. To avoid an overabundance of your time spent on answering these types of questions, we suggest that you create a Discussion Board thread that is specifically devoted to posting questions that students have regarding technology/Blackboard issues. When students question you about these types of issues, instruct them to first go to the appropriate discussion board thread and seek help from their fellow classmates. In most cases, their question is already answered in the

discussion board threads.

17. When your course is copied from semester to semester, certain characters are changed to question marks. This is due to the fact that Blackboard handles certain characters in Microsoft Word in strange ways. To avoid this problem, follow these steps when copying and pasting from Word into Blackboard:
 - a. Open the document in Word that you want to copy and paste.
 - b. From the Format menu select AutoFormat
 - c. Click the Options button
 - d. Uncheck Replace Straight Quotes with Curly Quotes, and Symbol Character (--) with the em dash.

These are the two special characters (Curly Quotes and Em Dash) that we have found that cause problems. **Please note also that this will change your settings inside Word for future documents, so if you like this feature of Word, you will have to set it back to the previous settings.**