Online Learning: Engaging Blackboard Course Design

Practice Guide

Your Blackboard Course Site is the home of your course. Make it an inviting place for students to visit, then they will want to stay!

You do not have to make big changes all at once, use this Guide as a sampler – even small changes can make a difference to the usability of your site.

This Practice Guide is based on a webinar run by the LTO, watch it here. It is supported by the principles of good on-line learning as advocated by ASCILITE (Parrish, Christie and Campbell, 2020)

Changing the Look and Feel of your Site

Did you know that in your Blackboard site you can change:

- Where the students land when they open the site;
- The colours;
- The menu items; and
- The banner at the top of the course page.

Guides for changing all of these things can be found in the Personalise Blackboard section of the LTO Course & Content Resources page.

You will need these resources to apply the suggestions the rest of this practice guide makes.

Course Organisation

Course Organisation – Content

The learning material that students will access over the course of a semester is quite substantial, so you will need to organise it to make it both easy to navigate as the semester progresses, and easy to search when students are revising. The easiest way to do this is to organise your content into folders. You can choose to name the folders by the time period in which the content is delivered (for instance Week 1, Week 2), or package up content into larger collections (for instance into learning modules), or sort content into concepts. Whatever you choose, make sure that when you create a folder, include a description of what students will find in the folder. Here is an example:
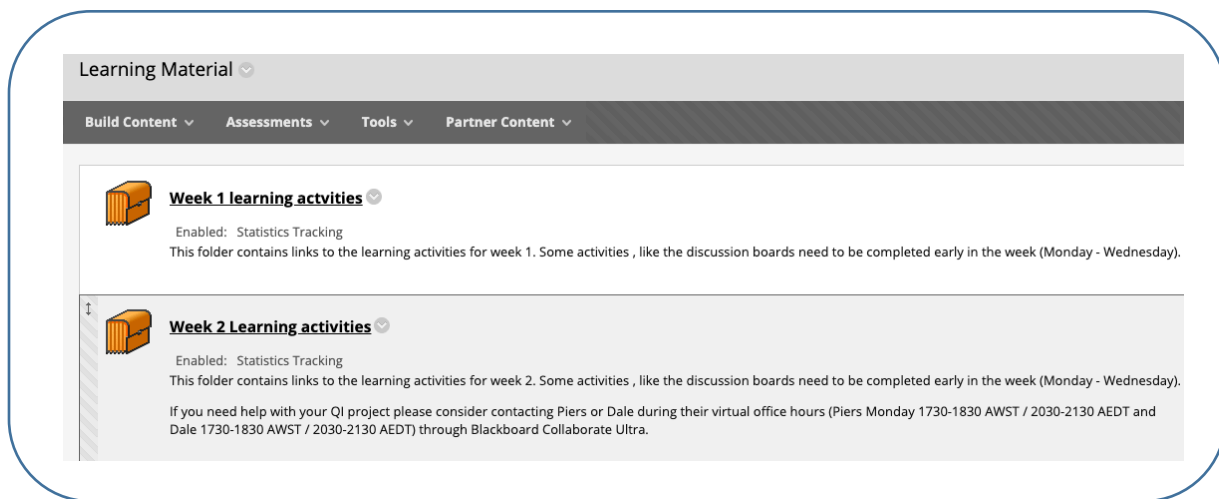
Course Organisation – Learning Activities

Students need to know what you want them to do with the content. To make it easy for them to learn integrate activities into the course *with links*. Here is a short video on how to include links in Blackboard and in other documents.

When describing an activity, let the student know:

- *What* is the activity;
- *Why* they are doing the activity;
- *When* it is to be done by;
- *How* it is to be done; and
- *How much* time or volume of work is expected.

Here is an example:
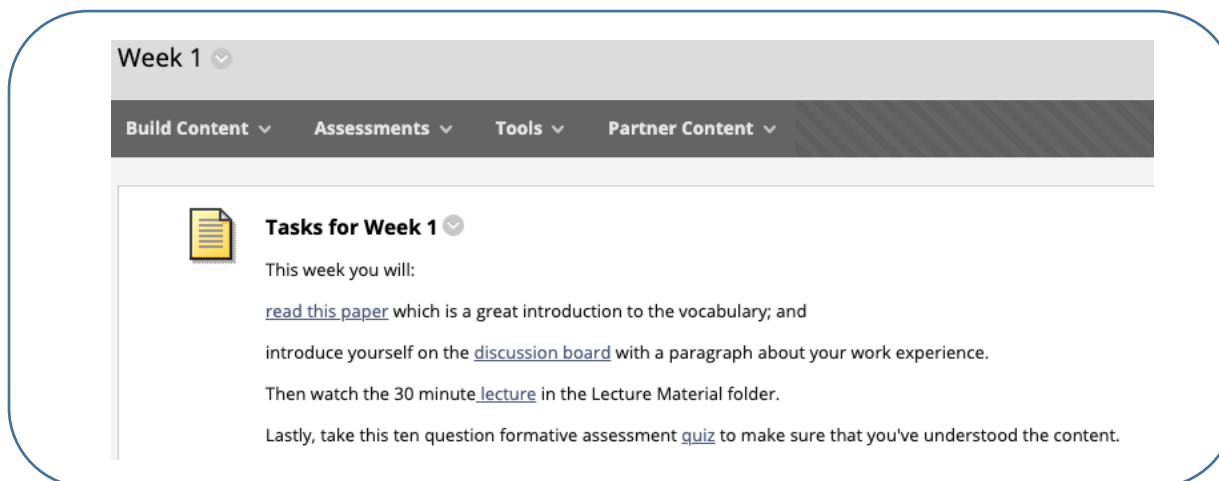
This additional information helps students make informed decisions about what to engage with, rather than putting everything off because they do not know how long it will take them or why they are doing it.

Course Organisation – Assessment

Most student questions are about the assessment items, so clarity and consistent messaging are key to calming their anxieties and reducing your workload.

Create a folder for each assessment in the Assessment section of your Blackboard menu. In it add:

- The assessment submission link;
- A document containing the task description;
- The marking rubric;
- Ideally a short video of you describing the task (this helps students review if they are on the right track), strategies to support success and pitfalls to avoid. It should not be longer than five minutes; and
- A link to a Discussion Board for assessment questions.

Regularly communicate with students either with announcements or by email. In a semester-long course, these communications should be at least weekly. Review in these emails what should have been accomplished in the previous week and summarise what is coming up. Suggest what progress should have been made on the assessment tasks at this point in the course to help students stay on track.

The week that the assessment is due, put a link in that week's Content Area to the assessment folder.

This way students get consistent information, clear directions and scaffolded time management, and if anything needs to change you can just change it in one place.

Course Organisation - Collaboration

Your students need to be able to work together so that they can learn from each other as well as from you. The two powerful tools that Blackboard has to facilitate this are Discussion Boards and Groups.

Discussion Boards

The Learning and Teaching Office ran a half hour webinar on encouraging students to interact with Discussion Boards and how to manage a large number of posts. To watch it click here. Having students post their experiences and reflections to Discussion Boards can mimic the kinds of interactions they would have in face-to-face tutorials, so support them to get into the regular habit of posting and reading each other's posts. You can even have a "semi-synchronous" session, where individual students working remotely, post the results of their tutorial activities in the same time window as their tutorial, and you can respond to them almost in real time.

Groups

You can organise students into Groups on Blackboard. When you create a Group in Blackboard (for instructions, click here), you give that Group a set of collaborative tools that are only available to them. Each Group can have its own Discussion Board, Journal, Blog and can share files and initiate Collaborate sessions. Students can be part of more than one Group, e.g. tutorial, study and assessment groups.

Take a look at external software such as Explain Everything, Flipgrid, Padlet, Answer Garden, and Google Docs for other engaging ways for your students to collaborate.

Create a Guide for your Course

While your course site makes sense to you, your students are enrolled in a number of courses, and they may all be organised differently. Make it easy for your students to navigate through the site and plan their time by creating a guide for your course. It should be short and full of links.

It can be a document that students can download, or you could create a Blackboard Item in which the information is organised in a table. Here is an example:

Course Navigations

Week	Content	To do individually	To do with peers	Assessment Progress
1 (27 July)	Assessment in Context	Journal Entry Glossary Entry	Collaborate Session Discussion Board	Find partner, locate policy document
2 (3 August)	History of Assessment	Journal Entry	Discussion Board	Start annotating policy document
3 (10 August)	Constructive Alignment	Journal Entry	Discussion Board	
4 (17 August)	The Regulatory Landscape	Journal Entry Glossary Entry	Collaborate Session Discussion Board	
5 (24 August	Principles of Assessment	Journal Entry	Discussion Board	Submit Assessment Task 1
6 (31 August)	Formative and Summative Assessment	Watch video	Blog Entry	

This way, students can see exactly what progress should have been made, and what they are supposed to be doing. Importantly, especially again in relation to cognitive overload, they do not have to go hunting through the site to find their resources or collaborative tools or worry that they have missed something. In addition, setting up your course in the manner suggested can help students who are working towards excellent organisational and time management skills a better chance at success.

References

Parrish, D., Christie, A. and Campbell, C., (2020, April 5), Teaching on-line – what students want. *Campus Morning Mail.* https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/teaching-on-line-what-students-want/