

Some simple steps to enhance your Blackboard site

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Following the pointers below will improve your Blackboard site and may promote more student engagement.

Why?

- 1 Let your students know why they should use the site, to show how it fits in with the broader delivery of your module. Either create a “Read this first” button, or post a welcome *Announcement* to explain the purpose of the site.

Course Tools

- 2 To stop the site looking abandoned, ensure that the *Staff Information* button is not empty. Where possible make sure that the delivery team’s details are added.
- 3 Post regular *Announcements* about new items of content or tasks, either in Blackboard or on the web, so that your site does not look abandoned. Remember to remove those that are past their sell-by date.
- 4 Use *Discussion Forums* with clear tasks attached to them – students need a reason to post a message. Examples include finding relevant web sites, discussing the next week’s content or concepts, feedback on a task. However, this will require tutor input in selling the forum’s worth.

Course structure and labels

- 5 If you don’t intend using all of the default buttons (e.g. *External Links* or *Module Information*) then hide or remove those that you do not want to use. [Control Panel > Manage Course menu]
- 6 Use meaningful and consistent labels for your buttons, as this helps students to locate relevant content. Change the name of the default Content Area buttons (*External Links* or *Module Information*) if they are not relevant, or add new ones to reflect your module’s delivery (e.g. *Group-work*, *Projects*). You can do this through Control Panel > Manage Course menu.
- 7 Within Content Areas use folders to store information about, for instance, specific concepts or assessments, or to store different tutor’s work.
- 8 Don’t lump everything into one Content Area, e.g. don’t upload all your documents into the *Module Documents* button – this can lead to unstructured, overlong lists.
- 9 Use sensible colour schemes for buttons and items of content. Avoid using a background pattern on your buttons and avoid using lurid colours for the names of content. Remember that students will be looking at the names on a white background. Ensure that a good contrast is maintained.

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- 10 Always test out changes or newly-uploaded material. Does the site look okay? Does it make sense in light of your module delivery? Ask another member of the team to check newly-uploaded material as well.

Content

- 11 Use text to describe each item of content that you upload, so that its nature and purpose are clear to your students.
- 12 Off-campus, any PowerPoint files that you upload may take a long time to download. They will load more quickly for your students if you:
- break them up into more-than-one file, based upon concepts or tasks;
 - remove unnecessary animations, images or slides; and
 - save and upload them as web pages.
- 13 Consider having a few *External Links* on your site to the DMU Library, your Reading List on-line, professional bodies or on-line journals.
- 14 Check your HEA Subject Centre web site for relevant web resources.
- 15 Open all *External Links* in a new window to avoid copyright infringement and to simplify navigation for your students. In the text box explain that your students should close the new window to return to Blackboard.
- 16 Don't infringe copyright; if you can't get clearance don't use the material. Check copyright with your subject librarian.

Assessment

- 17 Use Blackboard Surveys or Assessment Manager to create short diagnostic or formative tests for your students – to find out or test what they already know. This may help both you and them to be more effective, or to shape future face-to-face or on-line tasks.

- 18 Staff and students can use the *Show Options* tab in a *Discussion Forum* to “Collect” their own postings. These can be saved in a MS Word document and used in Portfolio presentation.
- 19 Use the site to post feedback about student work (e.g. general comments on work or mark distribution) and to show the results of student feedback (e.g. from the module feedback questionnaire). You might also state what will change as a result of their comments.
- 20 Use the Gradebook [**Control Panel > Gradebook**] to upload formative and (unratified) summative marks for each student. Use this function in connection with more general feedback.

Team-work

- 21 Get your whole module team to use the site and enrol them as Instructors through **Control Panel > Enrol User and then List/Modify User**. Solicit their views on design and content, as well as the purpose of the site.
- 22 Share the workload across the team for:
- creating and uploading content;
 - interacting with students via *email* or *Discussion Forums*; and
 - testing the look-and-feel and consistency of the site.

A shared approach should ensure a comparable student learning experience for different student groups.

- 23 Get student feedback on your site. Ask them what they like and what they don't, either at the end of face-to-face sessions or via a *Discussion Forum*.