Becoming part of the course

Using Blackboard to extend one-shot library instruction

by Christopher Cox

I f you're like me, many of the instruction sessions you conduct are of the one-hour, one-shot variety. Faculty members bring their students to the library, you do a little song-and-dance about the catalog, the library's databases, interlibrary loan . . . and then you rarely see the students again.

I'm forever looking for ways of extending these sessions, of having more communication with students during their research process, of becoming a part of the course. My prayers were answered with the campus' purchase of Blackboard, a course management software package.

Blackboard, like other course management software packages, lets faculty create course Web sites without knowing HTML. With Blackboard, course instructors fill out premade forms to add content. If they so choose, they can also upload course content in a variety of file formats and use the software to create assessments. Students can communicate with the instructors and with each other via e-mail, threaded discussion, and virtual chat.

Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) implemented Blackboard in August 1999.[1] While faculty here aren't required to use it, many have embraced the software's flexibility. It is now used by more than half of the courses taught at the college.

Electronic lists and conferences of late are filled with discussions of how instruction librarians can use the features of course man-

Example of a course homepage created with Blackboard.

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agement systems like Blackboard. Despite all the talk, not much has been written on the topic.

In the only article to date on the subject, "Using Courseware to Deliver Library Instruction Via the Web: Four Examples," four librarians present their experiences with four different course software packages. Nancy K. Getty and Linda Piele use the software to house and add

Instructors, TAs, and others with course creation permissions use Blackboard's Control Panel to add course content, create assessments, manage users, and define permissions.

functionality to tutorials about their libraries. Barbara Burd, whose university has Blackboard, uses the software to maintain material for a pre-existing library course she teaches. Sarah K. Burns uses courseware to create course units for a faculty-taught literature and communications course. The units include reading lists, quizzes, and threaded discussion. Burns's reasoning behind using courseware was to "integrate library instruction into the course itself."[2]

So how can Blackboard and other courseware help you integrate library instruction more fully into courses taught by other faculty members? Following a brief description of each of Blackboard's features, integration strategies will be offered. Most assume a good working relationship with and prior permission from the faculty member teaching the course.

Access

As a guest lecturer to the course, you have a right to certain privileges within the courseware system. Blackboard offers different levels of access to course participants:

• **Instructor.** Instructors have control over all course maintenance functions, including uploading content, creating and grading quizzes, tests and assessments, Gradebook editing, Digital Drop Box, and moderating the

Discussion Board and Virtual Classroom.

• **Teaching Assistant.** Teaching assistants can perform most instructor functions, including the posting of forums to the Discussion Board.

• **Course Builder.** Course Builders have access to the main content areas, such as Course Documents, Assignments, and External Links.

• **Grader.** Graders are allowed access to the Gradebook and Assessments only.

Have yourself added as an instructor. This will give you the greatest access to the course. If this is too far a stretch, being designated as a teaching assistant may do just as well.

Staff Information

The Staff Information page provides students with background and contact information on course instructors and teaching assistants. With your new role in hand, create a profile for yourself. Blackboard provides a form where you can add your name, phone number, e-mail address, and other relevant information. You can even upload a photograph of yourself so students will know whom to look for when they come to the library for help.

Course documents

The Course Documents page is used to organize learning materials and lesson aids. It's an excellent place to provide access to any handouts you may be using in that one-shot session or any additional handouts the students may find useful. You can upload pre-existing handouts in Word or PDF format or create them within Blackboard itself. Individual documents can be organized into folders, so create one for the library. Ask stu-

dents to review the documents in the folder prior to your instruction session.

Assignments

This content area houses written assignments and any assessments you may create. Why not create an assignment prior to your session asking students to complete that library tutorial or perform a search in a database?

Blackboard lets you create assessments using various types of questions: multiple choice, true/false, fill in the blank, multiple answer, matching, ordering, and short answer/essay. Create a quiz or assessment about the library for students to complete prior to or following the one-shot session. If the questions need not be specific to the course's subject area, you can create a pool of questions about the library. Include questions about interlibrary loan, location of materials, and evaluation of resources. Then you can simply import the question pool into the course and ask the software to randomly select so many questions to create the assessment. Assessments are graded by the software and sent to the electronic Gradebook. The faculty member will, of course, have the last word as to the weight the assessment will be given in the course.

Books

Instructors use the Books page to list textbooks and post recommended reading lists as well as the readings themselves. Make this area yours. Create a bibliography of library resources students may find relevant to their paper topics. Obtain copyright permission and scan in or link to readings on research or information literacy topics and ask students to read them prior to your session so that you can discuss them when you're together.

Communication

Blackboard offers three distinct communications options to students: e-mail, a threaded Discussion Board, and a Virtual Classroom. As a member of the course, you appear on a list of participants students can send e-mail to. Make sure they know that they can send research questions or requests for materials to you. Create a forum in the Discussion Board for students to discuss their research experiences. Ask them to post one question they have about the library or one concern they have about their research prior to your session. You'll have plenty to discuss while in class.

The Virtual Classroom is a Java application that allows users to enter into a real-time discussion with instructors, students, and colleagues. Use the Virtual Classroom to conduct virtual reference desk hours. Notify students that you will be logged in at a certain time each week and urge them to stop by virtually to ask questions about their research. The chat software allows you to control the chat, display pertinent Web pages on a virtual whiteboard, and receive private questions from those too shy to ask them of the group. It also logs past chats so other students can benefit.

Digital Dropbox

The Digital Dropbox is used by students to send files to their instructors and by instructors to return graded work. Students completing projects at WPI are often required to stick to a set research schedule, with an annotated bibliography due one day, a rough draft due another. As either an instructor or teaching assistant, I can view these assignments and offer comments on the quality of a student's research and references, leaving the content and grammar to the faculty member advising the project.

Instructors and TAs may create forums in the Discussion Board, where students can discuss class topics.

Local control, global reach

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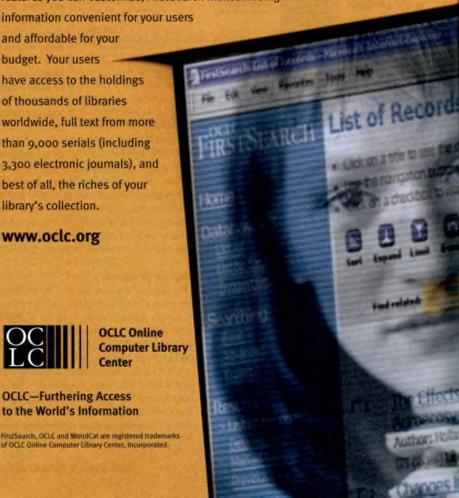
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External Links
The External Links area is used to reference Web sites related to a course. Use this area to showcase a list of evaluated electronic reference materials that you have discovered. You can also use External Links in conjunction with the Discussion Board. Have students send the URL of one Web site on their research topic to the Discussion Board and then post all the sites to the External Links page. Have students evaluate the Web sites and discuss whether they would be worthy of citation in their final bibliographies.

As you can see, Blackboard and similar courseware packages offer librarians an op-portunity to participate more fully in the coursework of our university's students. Even if a one-hour session is all the class time a faculty member is willing to give us, we can be active members of a course, answering questions, participating in discussions, directing students in the successful completion of their research.

Notes
1. WPI currently uses Blackboard 5.5 Level 3. For more information, see Blackboard's Web site at http://www.blackboard.com.
2. Nancy K. Getty, Barbara Burd, Sarah K. Burns, and Linda Piele. "Using Courseware to Deliver Library Instruction via the Web: Four Examples," *Reference Services Review* 28 No. 4 (2000): 349–59. ∎

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developed by students in the anthropology program at the University of Minnesota, Mankato, as part of an e-museum. The site is "by no means a comprehensive list," but more names are added each semester. The list, arranged alphabetically, contains almost 500 names of people who have influenced anthropology. A very useful tool that is easy to navigate. *Access:* http://emuseum.mnsu.edu/information/biography/. ∎