

Proposal for the “Standardization” of the Blackboard Experience at KVCC
Kennebec Valley Community College

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September 26, 2014

Introduction

KVCC has seen a rise in the use of online tools to support both online and face-to-face classes over the years. The vast majority of courses at KVCC utilize our current Learning Management System, Blackboard Learn. While we have come a long way in terms of developing and standardizing our online materials there is still work to be done. In a recent student survey conducted across the campus community, two issues presented themselves in terms of our use of Blackboard Learn.

Issue 1: Students expressed that while they enjoy having the additional resources of Blackboard in their classes, different teachers utilize Blackboard in different ways. In addition, they identified that some instructors that utilized Blackboard were not very 'skilled' at managing their own Blackboard class.

Issue 2: Students expressed great concern over how materials are organized in Blackboard, particularly when it involved an online class. Students expressed that it was difficult to find things in the course because each instructor organizes information in Blackboard in different ways.

In addition to the concerns expressed by students in these surveys, it has long been known that KVCC's use of Blackboard to deliver online courses is "diverse". The online courses that we offer attract a wider market than the geographic limitations of our college. Our large number of online classes also places us in the competitive market with highly skilled, well-funded, and organized online/distance education schools such as University of Maine-Augusta, Kaplan, St. Joe's and Southern New Hampshire University.

If we are going to compete in the online marketplace, we will need to fortify our position and improve our practice.

The following is a proposal to address these aspirations.

Goals and Presumptions

Online technologies and the demand for the development of online courses were largely thrust upon us without the necessary supports, with individual faculty left to construct their own courses using their intuitions and the mechanism of trial and error. KVCC offered very little technical or andragogical guidance, and we lacked a unified approach or strategy to unite our efforts.

The result of this disorganized history has been a mix of different and very personal approaches to the delivery of online content. Since faculty largely constructed their classes independently, the variety of approaches is wide. The student experiences exposed by the survey, therefore, reflect the history of online course development at KVCC.

As we approach this initiative it is useful to set some specific goals and presumptions:

1. While there is a wide disparity in course presentation, many faculty possess exceptional skill in regard to developing online content.
2. Departments, Programs, and individual Faculty have valid reasons for doing things the way they have and these must be honored.
3. This proposed initiative will not develop a SINGLE way to deliver online content that will be required by everyone using Blackboard, but will define and outline specific expectations that will improve the quality of ALL courses.
4. The focus of this initiative will be specific to Departments and/or Programs, each of which may develop a unique approach to the development of online materials while at the same time remaining in line with the standards set forth by this initiative.
5. Each Department and/or Program will develop a Standard Template course that will standardize the basic look and feel of all Blackboard instances within that Department or Program. The “template” will organize materials and resources specific to that Department or Program and will incorporate any “Institutional Standard Content” that is determined by the “Blackboard Standard” group.
6. Much of this work may entail a bit of “starting from scratch” in order to move our online materials into alignment. To focus our efforts we should prioritize our efforts in the following manner:
 - a. Courses that are being delivered totally online should be the first to be addressed.
 - b. Courses to be addressed should be assigned “Lead Faculty” who will be primarily responsible for developing any degree of “standardization” of online materials.
 - c. Courses being delivered in “hybrid” format should be the next priority.
 - d. Finally, we should realize the goal that ALL courses that utilize Blackboard will be aligned to each Department/Program’s model.

Proposed Steps and Procedures

The following is a proposal of the steps we may follow in the pursuit of this initiative. These steps will be reviewed, revised, and approved by both the Instructional Technology Committee and the Faculty Senate.

1. Upon approval to proceed by both the Instructional Technology Committee and the Faculty Senate, Faculty will be surveyed and determine a core “Blackboard Standards” group. Representation in this group will be comprised of a member of each Department or Program that will be developing a unique template.
2. The Blackboard Standards group will be charged with the following:
 - a. The development of standard terminology and Bb tool use and description.
 - b. The development of basic expectations for content organization in Bb.
 - c. The development of the expectations for the “Start Here” or “Welcome to Class” entry point for classes.
 - d. The development of any “Institutional Standard Content” (examples may include links to KVCC resources such as the Learning Commons and Writing Center that will be a part of every course).
 - e. The development of expectations for online teaching behavior, online attendance, and online course design.
3. Once the Blackboard Standards group has completed its initial tasks these standards and policies will be reviewed by the Faculty Senate.
4. At this point, individual Departments and/or Programs will begin to develop a unique template that will be used for the development and delivery of all courses within that Department or Program.
5. When templates are ready they will be reviewed by the Blackboard Standards group to assure they meet the minimal expectations for organization and content.
6. Each Department and Program will then develop a timeline for the somewhat arduous work of converting all existing courses into the new format based on that Department or Program’s template.
7. Members of the Blackboard Standards group will report out on progress related to their particular Department or Program.

Discussion Points

Based on experiences of standardizing the use of Bb in the Department of Social Sciences, the following discussion points and perspectives are presented:

Resurrect the Existing “Expectations for Online Teaching” Policies

- Guidelines for teachers of online courses have been established at KVCC before.
- These need to be revisited for review and implementation.
- We will need to consider technological solutions for monitoring compliance with these expectations.

ALL Courses at KVCC utilize Bb

- Welcome to Class folder as entry point (and all required content)
- ONE document with course schedule...order of content across the semester, ALL assignments, and ALL due dates.
- Grade Book records all grades and grade calculations
- Having ALL classes utilize Bb will also allow for the inclusion of standard Essential Learning Outcome assignments and content.

Standardized Blackboard Shells for Each Department

- Set standard look and feel.
- Standard menu items and order
- Standard content (across the college)
- Standard content (Departmental)
- Banner identifying each class and the Department
- Consider standard discussion boards
 - Student Lounge
 - Course Questions
 - Technical Questions

Standard Terminology and Standard Practice with Tools

- Discussions
- Messages
- Email
- Tests (quizzes, exams, etc.)
- Assignments (uploaded documents ONLY...no typing into the interface)

“Start Here” folder is replaced with “Welcome to Class” folder.

- Entry point to the course

- Custom banner is linked to this folder
- Everything else is a link in the menu – i.e. no course content in the Welcome to Class folder.
- Course Information
 - Start day, end day, time, room, teacher contact info, etc.
 - Syllabus
 - Course Policies
 - Bio of Instructor
- Weekly updated “To Do” item (online)

Specific to Online Classes

- Use of Discussions (Number per week or per course?)
- Use of the weekly updated “To Do” item is mandatory.
- All content is visible and remains visible through the class...do not hide things and then let them appear...students should be able to navigate to all aspects of the class on DAY ONE!
- While the expectations for face-to-face classes enhanced with Bb are less, all are encouraged to follow the standards for Online course delivery in all Bb courses.