



UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD

“Blackboard Ate My Homework”:

Strategies for Faculty to Forestall Student Complaints and Frustrations with Blackboard

Based on a workshop sponsored by the NEH/Harry Jack Gray Teaching Enhancement Grant and the Faculty Center for Learning Development

We’ve all heard, or read on our evaluations, student complaints about having to use Blackboard. This handout discusses easy and practical strategies that faculty can employ to respond to a number of common frustrations and difficulties. We will discuss problems with enrolling in a course on Blackboard, ways of familiarizing students with the various features of Blackboard in order to facilitate their uses for assignments, and anticipating common problems with Digital Drop Box, Discussion Board, and Quizzes.

Successful student use of Blackboard can be achieved with some faculty forethought and fore planning about likely problem areas with the system. In short we need to create a problem solving attitude; explain to students how and why Blackboard will benefit them; give them lots of opportunities early on to use the various features to get familiar; build in frequent use so that they get in habit of checking the course site regularly; and finally help them to avoid some common and frustrating pitfalls.

Blackboard Features: Building Familiarity

Issue: Students aren’t logging in or, if they are, they aren’t participating very much.

- Use an online Treasure Hunt to demonstrate all the features Blackboard has to offer.
- Post an online Ice Breaker on Discussion Board first week (e.g., “Why are you taking this course and what do you expect...”)
- Explain purpose of assignment, do a run-through in class (book a Smart Classroom if needed) – use ‘how to’ videos if available.
- State expectations clearly in first announcement and in first class (e.g., check once a week).
- Require early participation by posting first assignment on Blackboard.
- Require participation and award participation points (e.g., points for posting to discussion boards).
- Allow students to suggest additions to course site (e.g., websites, articles) so they feel like stakeholders in their learning.
- Book a Smart Classroom if needed, and conduct a hands-on orientation to demonstrate features.
- Post sample ‘substantive’ discussion answers as models students can follow.
- On discussion boards, ask open-ended discussions questions that cannot be answered with just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (e.g., how and why).

Logon Process: Common Mistakes

Issue: Student cannot log in to Blackboard.

- Make sure the student has a University of Hartford e-mail. If not, s/he will need to contact ITS at (860) 768-5999.
- Make sure the student is using only the first part of the University e-mail address (i.e. jdoe if email is jdoe@hartford.edu) as username.
- Make sure the student is using the correct password. All passwords are initially set to the last four digits of the University ID, which can be found on the student's ID card.
- Check to see if the student is logging in from a work computer. The security settings on many company computers do not allow Blackboard to run correctly.
- If username and password are correct, contact ITS for further assistance.

Issue: Student logs into Blackboard, but does not see any courses listed.

- The student should check with the Registrar to confirm that s/he is officially registered for the course. Only students who are officially registered will see Blackboard courses listed on their Blackboard Home Page.
- The student should check with the instructor to ensure that Blackboard is being used for the course.
- If the instructor for the course is listed as "Staff," the course will not appear in Blackboard. The instructor should contact the Registrar's Office to be listed on the Banner roster which will transfer to Blackboard.
- The instructor should check that the course is set to "available" for the students. To do so, go to Control Panel → Settings → Course Availability and make sure that "Yes" is clicked after "Make Course Available."

E-mail

Issue: Student is not receiving e-mails sent from Blackboard.

- Make sure the student is checking University of Hartford e-mail. All e-mails sent from Blackboard are delivered to the user's University e-mail account.
- Create the e-mail as an announcement in Blackboard and select "Email this announcement to all course users."
- Certain attachments are blocked in University e-mail. See <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/www/emailattach.html> for details.
- If the student is forwarding e-mails to a non-Hartford email address, ask him or her to check their 'spam' folder for Blackboard e-mails.
- Check with ITS to see if the Hartford e-mail system was down during the time messages were sent.
- Make sure the student isn't using Messages, the 'Blackboard only' alternative to e-mail.

Issue: Student receives error message when sending email from Blackboard.

- Check with ITS to see if the Hartford e-mail system was down during the time message was sent.
- Certain attachments are blocked in University e-mail. See <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/www/emailattach.html> for details.

Blackboard Content: Files

Issue: Student can't see file at all in Blackboard.

- Check to see if the document date options are being used. Instructors should check via their control panel to make sure items are available to students.

Issue: Student clicks on file and nothing happens, or there is only a blank screen.

- Could be proprietary software application files that require a plugin. Post a message letting students know how to find and download the plugin.
- Powerpoint: Students who do not have PowerPoint on their computers, can download the free Microsoft PowerPoint Viewer to view file.
- PDF: Students can download the free Acrobat Reader to view file.
- MS Word: Students who do not have Microsoft Word cannot open files that are saved in Microsoft Word. Save files as Rich Text Format (.rtf).
- If they cannot purchase it, suggest that students use a computer on campus to access Microsoft Word.
- Students using MACs may not realize that their download manager has downloaded the file somewhere onto their computer. They should use the Finder to locate the file.
- Extremely large files: Large files take so long to download; student may think there is nothing there and give up.
 - Instructors should not upload full video, and they should make sure that scanned PDF files and/or image files are small (e.g., kilobytes not megabytes)

Issue: Student tries to print files but not all the text prints properly.

- Make sure this isn't a browser issue. Some browsers allow user to select which parts of the webpage to print.
- For PCs, right click in actual text area and then select print from the menu. This will print out only that area of the screen.
- If text is cut off on right side, change print options to landscape.
- If file is very large (e.g., has lots of images in it), students should make sure the entire file has finished downloading before trying to print it.

Discussion Board

Issue: Students can't get to the main discussion board.

- Check to make sure your discussion board area is active (Control Panel → Manage Course Menu, click "Modify" next to "Communication," check "Make Available to Student Users," set Discussion Board to "Available.").

Issue: Students can't post to discussion board.

- Make sure you have posted an initial thread (topic) for them to reply to or that you have left them the option to start a thread.

Issue: Students can't add or open attachments on discussion board

- Make sure your Forum Rules are set up to allow attachments.
- Instruct students to open posted message first, then click on attachment file name, rather than clicking on the paperclip.

Issue: Student clicks on wrong link, opening an e-mail rather than a discussion post.

- Instruct students to click on subject line, not the name of person posting it.

Issue: Students can't find group discussion board, only the main board.

- Add Groups button to main Course Menu (along with Announcements, Course Information, Assignments, etc.)
- Post a message on main discussion board explaining the difference between the two boards, and how to access groups/discussion board.

Issue: Student says they took test but the online Grade Center doesn't show a grade.

Sometimes students forget to submit answers using the submit button or they hit the back browser button while taking a 'one attempt only' test.

- Have students print out a copy of their test prior to submitting it. (NOTE: This means they will have a copy of your test.)
- Use the Course Statistics under the Control Panel to see if there's any record of the student having accessed Blackboard at that time.
- Check what the Grade Center does say. A dash means there is no record of any attempt. A check means it was a survey; surveys don't get graded. An exclamation point or notebook icon means they did attempt to take it. Click on icon for further information. You may be able to see the partially completed test. Instructors can reset tests using the "Clear Attempt" button in the gradebook.

Issue: Making tests unavailable v. deleting tests

- Make tests unavailable using end dates or if removing links to them in a content area, be sure to select "Preserve Scores in the Grade Center."

Issue: Online gradebook says 'Failed Attempt' for test record, but student says he or she did take the test.

Some Internet Service providers have built-in 'timeouts' to close the connection after prolonged idle time. Since only the submit button is considered non-idle time, the connection may have been terminated while the student was filling in the answers.

- Break exams up into mini quizzes, instead of one long test.
- Set your test to display one question at a time, rather than all of the questions on one page, and tell students to save as they go.
- Remind students that once they start a test, they should not use the back button without completing it.
- Use Modify Test Options (once you deploy the test) to prohibit backtracking.

Blackboard Hardware and Software Recommendations

- You need a computer with multimedia capabilities (i.e., sound with speakers), a monitor capable of at least 800 x 600 resolution, a modem or Internet connection of least a 56K modem connection, and an Internet Browser in order to access Blackboard. Here are further specifications:
- Your browser must accommodate both Javascript and Java for some functions of the course. These are functions you can turn on in your browser.
- Your browser must be set to accept cookies (use minimum browser security settings).
- Windows users will need the Java Virtual Machine, which can be downloaded for free from Sun Microsystems. Mac OS 10.1 and higher have Java Virtual Machine already installed.
- Firewalls may affect your ability to access and use Blackboard. Windows users should know that Windows includes a firewall that is turned on by default. Instructions for turning it off are at XP: http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/security/internet/sp2_wfintro.mspx
Vista: <http://windowshelp.microsoft.com/Windows/en-US/help/bfe523a9-7eec-4d3f-add1-2f68b9cfa1c01033.mspx>
- Popup Blockers may affect your ability to use the Collaboration Tools and other features. Make sure blackboard.hartford.edu is listed as an accepted site.
- The following browsers are recommended: Internet Explorer 7.0 Firefox 3.0, and Safari 3.0 or higher.

Getting Help with Technology at the University of Hartford

Faculty Center for Learning Development (FCLD)

FCLD provides consulting and instructional support to faculty and staff who are using technology in teaching and learning. The FCLD Faculty Lab in Mortensen 203a is available for faculty support and use and is equipped with instructional technology-related equipment including: PCs, Macs, scanners, and projectors as well as support staff. Faculty wishing to use the lab may contact FCLD.

Phone: 768-4661

Email: fclld@hartford.edu

Website: <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/fclld/>

Information Technology Services (ITS)

ITS Help Desk – Computing Center

For general computer and Internet/network support questions (not directly related to the classroom but rather passwords, Internet/email problems, printer not working, banner, facebook, and grades).

Phone: 768-5999

Email: its@hartford.edu

Website: <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/its/>

Media Technology Services (MTS) – Harry Jack Gray Center 111A

Faculty should contact MTS for assistance scheduling or implementing classroom technology (2-way video classrooms, Smart Podiums, COWS, laptops, etc.) or for scheduling and instruction for a wide variety of media equipment and resources like LCD data projectors, CD/cassette players, TVs and VCRs, digital video, and more.

Phone: 768-4643 (Main) or 768-4662 (Tech Line)

Website: www.hartford.edu/mts