

An Introduction to Blackboard in Keisen English Classes

Mark Firth

1 What is Blackboard?

Blackboard is a Web-based learning environment which comes under the umbrella of a variety of terms such as: CMS (Course Management System), LMS (Learning Management System), VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), LCMS (Learning Content Management System). Whilst there are other acronyms to describe slightly different types of learning systems, it is generally accepted that the two major terms used are CMS and LMS. The difference between a CMS and an LMS is in its focus. A Course Management System is designed to assist teachers in their teaching: course materials delivery, discussion boards, on-line quizzes and testing, record keeping, and more. In contrast, a Learning Management system has a focus more on the learners themselves through the extensive use of blogs, chat and other such plug-ins. There is however a large overlap between these two systems and both systems often offer the same types of functions; the difference is more on its focus and user-friendliness. It is generally accepted that Blackboard belongs to the category of CMS and a similar product that readers may be aware of, Moodle, belongs to the LMS group.

It is important to note that Blackboard is not software that is

bought, but rather is leased for an annual fee and installed on the institution's server. The campus administrator is then appointed to register classes for teachers. In the case of Keisen University, administration of Blackboard is handled by the Education and Research Support Center (Kyouiku Kenkyu Shien Center).

2 Why Blackboard?

One concern that many teachers may have is that they feel they are not computer savvy enough to handle developing and delivering their courses online. Teachers can be reassured that Blackboard requires only very basic computer knowledge to get started and that all instructions within the program itself are mostly very easy to handle. This functionality is seen to be one of Blackboard's biggest advantages over rival CMS and LMS systems. Furthermore, users can choose to view the frames in English or Japanese. Because Blackboard is installed on the client's server, Blackboard is accessible for teachers and students from anywhere in the world and does not require any software downloads or installations by its users. Privacy is also not an issue. Each course is password protected and students and teachers can only access the particular classes for which they are registered.

Utilizing Blackboard in the classroom builds confidence in web-based skills for both teachers and learners. One study conducted by Teng and Allen (2005) documents the self-reported increases amongst professors and trainee-teachers' skills and confidence in integrating technology into their classrooms after using Blackboard. The project on which the study was based was initiated due to concerns that staff not only lacked the skills and confidence in integrating technology into their teaching, but also because faculty were not effectively modeling the use of technology to their students.

This need for teachers to model the use of technology can be generalized to apply to students of all departments at Keisen University too. If Keisen is to continue to attract students to enroll in its courses, then it must also demonstrate that it is keeping up with current technological advances in education and learning. As a result, students will be better equipped for incorporating technology into their own learning and careers long into the future.

3 Creating a course in Blackboard

To get started, teachers need to indicate to the Education and Research Support Center that they want to utilize Blackboard for a given class. Following this, an e-mail is then sent to the teacher's nominated e-mail account with log-in and password details. When logging in, a language option is given for either Japanese or English. After logging in, users can see the courses for which they are enrolled. To begin uploading course materials, teachers use the 'Control Panel' which is

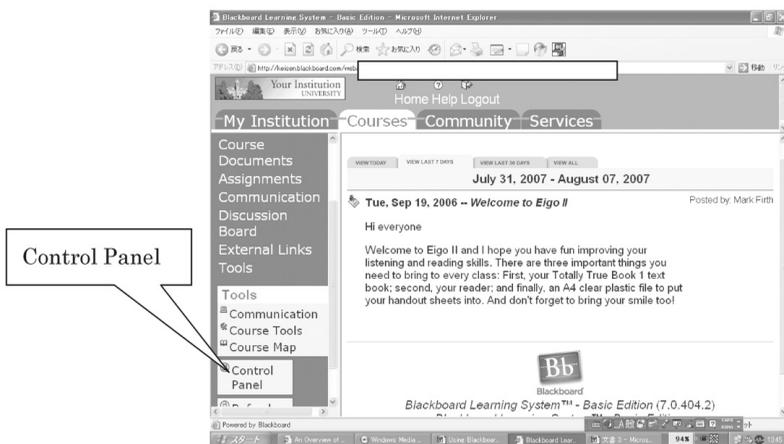


Figure 1. After logging into Blackboard – A front page with Control Panel for teachers.

available only to them.

4 Using Blackboard to facilitate your teaching at Keisen

Class Administration – After going into the tools frame, instructors can upload all of the course documents which they want students to have permanent access to. This is also a convenient place to put up handouts and homework sheets, so if a student is absent for a class, she knows it is her own responsibility to find out what she missed and what she will have to do before the next class.

Assignments – Using the built in tools, instructors can create a variety of quizzes and tests for students to take, including cloze exercises, multiple choice, true/false questions, fill in the blanks and others. The test options allow the instructor to choose whether the student can have multiple attempts at a quiz or test, see her score immediately or even see the questions she got wrong with the correct answers. One clever option is to randomize the questions for each test taker so that even if students are seated closely together in a computer lab, they are unable to readily make out a fellow student's response to a given question.

Gradebook – Students' results for quizzes and tests are automatically put into a Gradebook for the teacher to immediately see how the class is faring. This is particularly useful for finding out early on in the semester the levels of the students so as the instructor can adjust the level of testing accordingly. On a practical level, the other big benefit of course is the possibility to administer more short quizzes on a weekly basis so as students can receive immediate feedback on their progress and the quantity of assessment is not restricted by the instructor's ability to keep up with corrections. Another benefit of the Gradebook is the spreadsheet, which can be exported from the course into an Excel file with all the weightings for assignments and tests already calculated.

Students can also see their own final grades easily if the instructor selects this option. Finally, from a research perspective, the statistical analysis of the class results could be seen as a big time saver whereby the mean, standard variation and variance are also given for each test item.

Multimedia – Audio files can be uploaded and the Mp3 format tends to be the easiest. This is a particularly useful tool because students can listen to a recording at their own pace and as many times as they require. Instructors also have more flexibility in how they want to use audio in the classroom. Jigsaw listenings are easily organized since students can be listening to different audio recordings at the same time using headphones. If the teacher has an Mp3 voice recorder available, then authentic listening materials can be directly uploaded into the system, including students' own interviews, audio diaries, role-plays etc. Alternatively, a voice recorder can be purchased for the Apple iPod and recordings can be made in the same way.

Video files can be uploaded into Blackboard in most common formats; however, the predominant format is AVI. The only drawback is that digital recording on either a digital video camera or digital camera with MPeg capability will require compression software to make the files small enough to be downloaded by users in a reasonable amount of time. One solution to this is to change the camera settings to a lower quality recording to reduce the file size which tends to make compression a little easier. Alternatively, I have simply uploaded my own video files to other places on the Internet such as Google's *Picasa* or *Blogger* and posted links in Blackboard. This degree of difficulty shows a major limitation of Blackboard's earlier versions: having to post video outside of Blackboard is obviously not the best option.

It is always motivating for students to work hard when they know

their role-plays will be recorded and put up into Blackboard for the rest of the class to see, and likewise, it is a rewarding experience when they can see themselves performing. From a privacy point of view it should be made clear to students that nobody else can see their video footage except for their class members; i.e., it is not going to be posted on the Internet for all to see.

Podcasting is an add-on feature, otherwise known as a content building block, which can be used in Blackboard version 7.2. As yet, Keisen's version 5 of Blackboard does not have this feature but it is hoped that it can be made available in the near future as another mode for teachers to deliver their content and interact with students. When it does become available, a blog posting by Ramsden (2006) has an easy-to-follow explanation of how teachers can create and send their podcasts in Blackboard.

As many teachers are aware, blogs are an increasingly useful tool to have students produce and display their work in. Whilst other net-based blogs are no doubt available, it is arguably more secure and convenient to have class blogs all at the one location within Blackboard. The building block for blogging is termed *as My Journal* in Blackboard and is available in the Keisen current version but is yet to be plugged in. Likewise with Podcasting, it is hoped that it will be installed in the next system update.

5 Integrating Blackboard into a Keisen course.

The extent to which teachers can incorporate Blackboard into their courses is naturally controlled by the logistical constraints of timetables, computer room availability and the number of times a given class meets per week. Conveniently, first year English classes (Eigo I/II) are held twice a week which allows for computer assisted classes on one day and

regular classrooms on the other. This combination allows the teacher to conduct more of the usual four–skills classes to be accompanied by computer based activities alternately.

It is recommended that teachers begin using Blackboard only to the extent to which they are comfortable. This could entail just exploiting the Quizzes section of Blackboard for the first time around and then gradually incorporating more functionality in future courses.

Finally, using Blackboard is an excellent way to instill responsibility into students. If their teacher tells students that there will not be take out handouts for classes, but rather that it is the students' responsibility to go to Blackboard and print off each week's readings, assignment sheets and other such documents, then students make progress in becoming more autonomous learners. This has the added benefit of students having to think about the class work between classes, which is particularly useful when classes only meet once a week.

6 Potential disadvantages of using Blackboard

Instructors need to maintain a macro–perspective of the program they are delivering to their students because there are potential pitfalls of implementing courses with Blackboard. Johnson (2003) warns that,

Merely changing the format creates passive programs that end up frustrating learners. Well designed Blackboard training takes new or existing content and uses the power of Blackboard to increase student learning. They are learner centered, designed to engage the learners, draw on their experiences and meet their needs. (P.4).

Another pedagogical concern that teachers need to be mindful of is

that interactivity amongst students can easily be lost when classes are conducted in a computer-equipped classroom. Arguably, this is where an LMS would have an advantage over Blackboard due to its interactivity by design. Perhaps the best way to combat these difficulties is for instructors to ensure that they empower students to take more control of how they use Blackboard as well as choices about course content wherever possible. Specifically, students can make their own profile pages within Blackboard with photos and links to their own favorite websites. Electronic journals, blogs and discussion boards can all enhance the students' ownership of their learning.

Conclusion

As a result of this paper, it is hoped that teachers of English specifically, and more broadly other teachers at Keisen, will be able to instruct their courses more effectively with a reduced burden of class administration, ease of content delivery and automated assessment. In doing so, the administrative time saved can be utilized in tailoring the course material to individuals and interacting with students more than ever before.

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Whilst it is widely known that within the past few years there has been a rapid expansion in the institutional use of Course Management Systems (CMS), unfortunately there is little research available documenting improved learning outcomes as a direct result of their usage (Szabo, 2002). What is made clear however according to the feedback given by educators, are the benefits of using a CMS with regards to increased efficiency in course administration.

Most teachers of English at Keisen University have heard of the term 'Blackboard' and a number of teachers have expressed their interest in using the online learning system. The purpose of this paper is to assist teachers of English at Keisen to understand some of the key features and functions of Blackboard. As a result, teachers will have enough background knowledge to get started in delivering their own courses using Blackboard. In doing so, not only Blackboard's functionality and user-friendliness is outlined, but also some common difficulties and drawbacks of the system are offered