Blackboard Course Design

Overview and guide

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1. About this guide
This guide is for staff and covers designing a course in Blackboard. You can either go through it step-by-step or use it as a reference. For more help on editing in Blackboard you may also need to refer to other materials on the Blackboard Help tab.

2. Essential information
Terms in *italic text* are explained in the Glossary. This guide covers basic options for course design in Blackboard, including editing the course menu and adding folders. It is not definitive, but will hopefully provide some ideas as to what is possible. If you have any questions or need further help with course design in Blackboard please contact the Digital Education Office (DEO): digital-education@bristol.ac.uk

3. Requesting a Blackboard course review
The DEO can help you make the most of online and blended approaches in your unit(s) or programme, including optimising the design of your Blackboard courses. We can provide consultation, advice, support and training whether as part of a small targeted intervention, a Unit or Programme review, a School level initiative or within a Curriculum Review and Development process.

A Blackboard course review is on the one hand a sort of MOT, to make sure for example that your Blackboard courses meet basic standards, but it will also provide an opportunity to go beyond the basics, further improving the experience of both students and staff.

**Process**
- Contact us to request a Blackboard course review, with details of the unit(s) / programme and any particular concerns you have
- We will get in touch with you to arrange an initial discussion to find out more
- We will agree a plan with you, to ensure that all relevant aspects are considered. Part of this will normally be a review of relevant Blackboard courses against our rubric for online course spaces
- Once we have carried out the review, we will send you our recommendations, together with links to supporting resources or other suggestions for implementing the improvements e.g. staff training
- We will meet with you to discuss the recommendations and next steps

4. Why is course design important?
Poorly designed courses can be frustrating both for staff editing them and students using them. It can be hard to find information if this is not clearly signposted. Empty or out-of-date areas can take users down blind alleys. A lack of instructions may mean students are unsure how they are expected to be using a particular course.

Blackboard is used in different ways, and whilst some information e.g. a unit outline, is to be expected across all courses, other aspects may vary depending on teaching and learning approaches. For example, in some courses students will be submitting their assignments electronically, in others they may be required to participate in online discussion, in others the lecturers may use online tests, or elsewhere students may be blogging or keeping an online journal.
5. Principles of course design

Well-designed courses:

1. are well-organised and easy to navigate
2. have clearly stated purposes
3. have in-built support
4. align with your teaching and intended learning outcomes
5. are current, actively supported and maintained
6. are clean e.g. no unnecessary content / formatting
7. are accessible to all
8. are engaging and encourage student contribution
9. have a consistent look and feel
10. are efficient to maintain
11. use appropriate and varied materials

6. Recommendations for planning your course

- Before starting to design your course, it is important to consider and plan what it is for, how students are expected to use it, and how learning resources or activities online are related to face-to-face teaching.
- Once you have done this then you can start to plan the course layout. The main navigation in Blackboard is through the left-hand menu. This is made up of links and Content areas (which contain resources and activities).
- Initially it is a good idea to sketch out on paper the main Sections and their contents. Start by listing the items in the course menu, then list the folders / sub-folders in each Content area, trying to avoid having too many items on a single page
- Identify how you expect students to engage with the resources in your course, for example will they be expected to read certain texts prior to face-to-face sessions? Will they be using online Discussion Fora after face-to-face sessions? Will they be taking online quizzes for revision?
- List the tools you plan to use in your course e.g. Announcements, Discussion Fora, and plan where you will put them
- It is essential that students know what each Blackboard course space is going to be used for, and that this is clearly signposted. You could create a course map which users can refer to if there are going to be lots of materials / activities. A consistent approach is recommended across related courses e.g. all of the units in a programme, perhaps with a core series of menu items. Additional items and content can then be added to this as required to allow flexibility for lecturers.
- Consider how you can enhance access for students using mobile devices. Using the Blackboard app they can access announcements, Discussion Fora, My Grades and other features anyway, but with some types of content e.g. quizzes, there are options to create mobile friendly versions. The guide in Section 20 “Related resources” has more on this.
- Ensure that any resources you use in your course, including images, video or audio are copyright cleared. There are lots of resources which may be useful, from Creative Commons licensed material to e-reserves. (See Section 20 “Related resources”)
- Ensure that resources you use in your course are accessible. There are useful guides on creating accessible resources from Techdis as well as University guidance (See Section 20 “Related resources”)
7. Recommendations for improving an existing course

Staff may inherit a Blackboard course from a colleague, for example if they are taking over the teaching of a unit. Improving an existing course need not take a huge amount of time. Simple changes can make a Blackboard course more effective. Again it is first important to plan how you want students to use the course, as described in Section 5 above. Once you have sketched out your intended uses you can use strategies to edit the course you have inherited, including:

a) Review the course menu, hiding or deleting unwanted items or duplicates (see Section 10 for instructions)

b) Reduce the number of folders and sub-folders. Use the Content system to link to multiple files in a single item (see Section 14)

c) Add a course map, and embedded instructions

d) Check for dead links

8. Checklist

Here are some things you might include in your Blackboard course:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) Unit information, including a description, Assessment details and Intended Learning Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b) Instructions for students on how they are expected to use the Blackboard course for this unit, e.g. for pre-session reading, discussion, to submit assignments etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Staff contact information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) A brief map of the course listing what students will find in the different Sections. You could also add an item at the top of each page which summarises what is in that section e.g. called “About this section”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Weekly readings, slides, lecture recordings etc., organised by week, topic or tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Links to Library resources and/or e-reserves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g) Communication and/or discussion tools, e.g. email, announcements, Discussion Fora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h) Group areas e.g. to support group projects or activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Testing your course

Before telling students that the course is available, it is advisable to test it to check that everything is OK. Instructors can view courses as a student by using Student Preview. This in the top right of a Blackboard course, next to the Edit Mode button. However, in order to thoroughly test an activity, such as online submission, or to see exactly what a student sees, it is necessary to use a test student account. Instructors can create a test student as follows:

a) In the Control panel of your course click on Course tools
b) Click on Add test student. The student username will be your username_s
c) Enter a password, and confirm this.
d) Click Create Test Student

You will need to use the Guest login option at http://www.ole.bris.ac.uk when logging in as this student. Log in as yourself using one browser e.g. Internet Explorer, and as the test student using another e.g. Chrome to be able to switch between the two roles without logging out.

10. Building and editing your course menu

Editing the course menu

The course menu can contain links, tools, and content areas. It is a good idea to have consistent menu items across unit courses, so students can navigate easily.

Adding a new content area

a) Log into Blackboard and click on the relevant course. Ensure Edit Mode is ON
b) In the toolbar at the top of the course menu, hover over +, & click Content Area
c) Enter name, make available to users, if appropriate, and click Submit
d) Then click on the content area to start to add folders and other materials
e) Start by adding an item which says what is in that section. Click on Build Content then Item, enter a name e.g. “About this section” then some text to describe it.

Adding a tool link to the course menu

A tool link might, for example, be to the Discussion Board page, which lists all Discussion Fora in the course
a) Ensure that Edit Mode is ON
b) Above the course menu, hover over +, & click Tool Link
c) Enter tool name and choose the type of tool you want to link to
d) Make available to users, if appropriate, and click Submit
**Linking to an external website**
N.B. All links in the course menu must be to secure (https) sites. For example http://www.bbc.co.uk/news will not be accessible but https://www.bbc.co.uk/news will be fine.

a) To add an external web link to the course menu ensure that Edit Mode is ON
b) In the toolbar above course menu, hover over +, then click Web link
c) Enter name and URL
d) Make available to users, if appropriate, and click Submit

**To rename a menu link**

a) Click the arrow to the right of the menu item you wish to rename
b) Click Rename Link and type the new link name
c) Click the green “save” tick to the right of the box

**To hide or delete a menu link**

a) Click the arrow to the right of the menu item you wish to hide or delete
b) Click Hide Link (this will hide it from students) or Delete (Note: this will delete any content in that area of the course)

**To re-order menu items**

Either

a) Ensure Edit Mode is ON
b) In the toolbar at the top of the course menu, click the button ↑↓

c) You will see the re-order menu
d) To move an item, click on it and then click the up and down arrows
e) Repeat for all items to be moved
f) Click Submit

Or

a) Ensure Edit Mode is ON
b) Click the up-down arrow (↑) to the left of the item to be moved and hold
c) Drag item up or down to desired location and release
**Viewing Course menu in a new window**
Blackboard contains a built-in tool to view the contents of a course in a new window.

![Course menu in a new window](image)

**Using Dividers on the course menu**
You can add horizontal lines to your course menu to break it up into Sections

![Dividers on course menu](image)

a) Ensure that Edit Mode is **ON**
b) Above the course menu, hover over +, & click **Divider**
c) The Divider will appear at the bottom of the course menu
d) Click on the ↓ icon to the left of it and drag it into position

**Adding subheaders in the course menu**

a) Ensure that Edit Mode is **ON**
a) Above the course menu, hover over +, & click **Subheader**
b) The subheader will appear at the bottom of the course menu
c) Click on the ↓ icon to the left of it and drag it into position

**Changing the course entry point**

a) **Announcements** is set as the default course entry point. This can be changed
b) Click on **Control Panel** to open options (if necessary)
c) Click Customisation, then click Teaching Style
d) Under 1 Select Course Entry Point choose a course menu item from the drop-down menu. Click **Submit**
11. Using folders

Folders are useful for organising your course documents, links, and other information. Try not to have too many folders within folders, as this can make content hard to find. Ideally you should aim to restrict the course to three levels, Level 1 being the menu item, Level 2 the top folder, and Level 3 sub folders if required. Top level folders could, for example, be structured by topic, week, or person teaching. Within that folder you may then have sub folders, for example for tasks or activities.

To create a folder:

a) Ensure that Edit Mode is ON
b) Click the area on the left hand menu where you want to add the folder
c) Hover over Build Content with your mouse and click Content Folder, under the New Page heading
d) Enter folder name, and add information in the text box, if appropriate, then click Submit

12. Using items

Items are basic building blocks of a course, which can be used to add text, images and other media, e.g. to provide instructions or learning content, and also to attach files.

a) Ensure Edit Mode is ON (in the top right)
b) Click on a content area
c) Hover over Build Content, then click on Item under the Create heading
d) Enter a name for the item
e) Enter some text and/or other media such as an image, then click Submit
13. Creating a course welcome page

One way of creating a course welcome page is to create a “Welcome” Content area, within that add an item with your welcome message and any images or videos, then make this page the course entry point.

a) In the toolbar at the top of the course menu, hover over +, & click **Content Area**, then type Welcome
b) Click on the “Welcome” content area
c) Hover over **Build Content**, then click on **Item** under the **Create** heading
d) For name enter “Welcome”, add your text and/or other media such as an image, then click **Submit**
e) To set the Welcome page as your course entry point, in the Control Panel click **Customisation**, then **Teaching Style**
f) Under 1 “Select Course Entry Point” choose “Welcome” from the list, then click **Submit**
g) An alternative method is to create a welcome announcement which is not date restricted. Make sure this is positioned above the “New announcements appear below this line” bar. You can do this by dragging the announcement up if necessary.

**Removing icons**
In **Control panel – Customisation – Teaching Style** you can change the default view of items to choose not to display the Blackboard icons which normally appear next to items. This is one way of providing a cleaner view.

14. Banner images

**Adding a banner image**
Banner images or logos can be added at the top of the course home page. Blackboard’s recommended size for a banner image is 480 x 80 pixels.

a) From the course home page click on **Control Panel** to open options (if necessary)
b) Click Customisation, then click Teaching Style
c) Under Select Banner click Browse My Computer
d) Select the required image and click **Open**, then click **Submit**
15. Adding an image on a page

If you are looking for images to use, try Flickr Creative Commons: [https://www.flickr.com/creativecommons/](https://www.flickr.com/creativecommons/)

Find and save an image first.

You can add an image wherever you find the Blackboard editing toolbar, for example when adding an item, or posting on a discussion forum or blog. This allows you to combine an image with text, which we will show in the following example.

a) Find the area of the course where you want to add the item and make sure **Edit mode** is **ON** in the top right.
b) Move your mouse over **Build Content** and choose **Item**. Enter a name for your item.
c) Underneath you will see a text box with the editing toolbar at the top.
d) Click the double down arrow on the right-hand side to expand to more options.
e) Enter some text in the text box, then press Enter on your keyboard.
f) Click on the **Insert/Edit image** button.
g) A window will open where you can browse to find an image.
h) Click **Browse my Computer**, and find and select your image.
i) When you have selected it you should see a preview.
j) Enter an image Description and Title.
k) If you click on the Appearance tab you can change the image dimensions.
l) Click **Insert**.
m) You should then see the image in the text box. If necessary, you can make the text box bigger by dragging the bottom corner.

n) Press Enter then underneath the image add an image attribution if required.

o) When you have finished click **Submit**.

p) To edit the image later click on it to select it, then click the **Insert/Edit image** button again.

Alternatively, if you just want to upload an image by itself (without text), in step b) above simply click on **Build Content**, then select **Image**.
16. Using Learning Modules to structure content

Learning Modules are a way of structuring content items as a self-contained online tutorial. This can be a good way to present several pages of material and can be set up so that students work through the material in a specific order. It can also provide an alternative to using too many nested folders.

The example below shows a Learning Module guiding staff through how to use Blackboard for online submission.

![Learning Module example](image)

The menu on the left lists the pages in the tutorial. Pages can include text, images, video, quizzes and many other content types.

To create a Learning Module:

a) Make sure **Edit Mode** is ON

b) Find the appropriate place in the course where you wish to add it

c) Click on **Build Content** and choose **Learning Module**. Enter a name, complete the options, then click on **Submit**. You will see the Learning Module item created.

d) Click on it and you will then be able to add Content using the normal menus.

![Learning Module creation](image)
17. Embed YouTube videos

Using embed codes you can extend Blackboard to incorporate a range of other resources, for example YouTube videos and Google forms or presentations. This example shows you how to embed a video from YouTube, but the same approach can be used with many other sources which offer embed code to copy.

a) Go to www.youtube.com and find a video you want to embed. At the bottom of YouTube videos you will see a Share tab. Click this then click Embed.

b) First set the video to the size you want, for example width="420" height="315" (you can change this later if necessary). You might also want to untick the “Show suggested videos” button. Then highlight and copy the code.

c) Go to the area in your course where you want to embed the video and click Build content, then Item. Enter a name for the item. You should see 3 rows of buttons at the top of the text box. If you cannot see 3 rows click the double chevrons in the top right. When you have your embed code from YouTube click the HTML button.

b) A new page will open up, paste your embed code and click Update. Then click Submit.

c) If you need to change the size of the video, click Edit from the menu to the right of the item name, then click the HTML button again.
18. The Blackboard Content System

The Content system, accessed via the Content tab or “Content” in a course Control Panel, is where Blackboard keeps all the files that are added to it. There are a number of separate areas in the Content system:

**Course / Organisation Content:** When you upload a file to a Blackboard Course or Organisation, it is added to Course/Organisation content for that course. By default, files stay there in a single folder. However, you can organise them into folders, so it becomes quicker and easier both to add materials to your course and to update them.

**My Content:** This gives each user a personal area where they can store files.

**Institution Content:** All material added here is, by default, visible to and searchable by all staff and students. Files e.g. Handbooks, stored here can be linked into multiple courses, which allows a change to a single file to be reflected in many courses, and helps make sure all people are using the most current versions of files.

19. Managing files and folders using the Content System

With the Blackboard Content system, it is quick to upload, link to and manage files and folders. This can save time especially if you have a large amount of content in your course. In this example we will create a folder and upload multiple files into it. **Before you start, create at least two test documents in Word and save them.**

**Step 1: Create a menu item in your course.**
Instructions on how to do this are in Section 10 above. If you have already done it please move on to step 2.

**Step 2: Create a corresponding folder in the course content area**

a) In the Control Panel expand the Content menu.

b) Click on the top link, which in your test course will be **test_your_username_year**

c) Once in Course Content click Create Folder. Enter a folder name which is the same as the menu item you created in Step 1, e.g. **Handouts**, then click **Submit**
**Step 3: Create a link to the folder in your course**

a) Click on the course menu item you created in Step 1  
b) Move your mouse over **Build Content**, then click on **Item**  
c) Enter a name e.g. handouts  
d) In Attachments click on **Browse Content Collection**  
e) Select the folder you created in Step 2 by ticking the box next to it, and click **Submit**, then click **Submit again**

**Step 4: Upload files to your folder**

a) Click on the link you just created  

b) Hover over **Upload**, then click on **Upload files**. You will come to the Upload Files screen (If you see a security warning, allow the Java applet to run, by clicking **Don't Block**)  

c) Click **Browse My Computer** and find the files you created earlier, select them and then click **Submit**  
d) If you need to add more files you can simply put them into the folder. Or you can update existing files by uploading new versions in (you will be asked if you want to overwrite the existing version).
20. Copying content from a course package or another course

You can copy content from one course to another, thus saving time. See the Blackboard Help for Instructors Section on copying courses for details. To access this, click on the Help tab then Help for Instructors, and search for “copying courses”.

Similarly, it is possible to design a package of Blackboard materials & tools that can be imported into courses. This saves staff time and can be used to aid consistency. Use of the Blackboard content system means that if a package needs to be updated (e.g. if instructions change) it can be updated in all the courses it has been added to in a single change. Support materials can be built into the packages.

The DEO has worked with academic and support staff colleagues to create packages around assignment submission, key School documentation and other common instructional needs, and helped to import these into multiple courses. Blackboard Help for Instructors has basic information on importing packages. However, we recommend that you contact us in the first instance, for advice on the most suitable approach for you, particularly if you are thinking of using a package in multiple courses.

21. Structuring online activities

There are different ways to structure online activities. One was developed by Gilly Salmon, who coined the term "e-tivities", which she describes as: "frameworks for enhancing active and participative online learning by individuals and groups." (Salmon, G (2002) *e-tivities the key to active online learning* Routledge Falmer)

Salmon outlines the key characteristics of e-tivities as:

- Motivating, engaging and purposeful
- Based on interaction between participants
- Designed and led by an e-moderator
- Asynchronous (usually taking place over time)

When you are developing online (or indeed face-to-face) activities, it may be helpful to use Salmon's "e-tivities" structure.

The main elements of a structured e-tivity for participants are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spark</th>
<th>A small piece of information which acts as a stimulus or challenge e.g. video, image, quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>The purpose of the e-tivity, which may include a link to intended learning outcomes and/or assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td>This is where you tell participants exactly what to do, where e.g. a discussion forum, and when. You may also give them an idea of the size of the contribution you expect e.g. number of words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Here you start to scaffold the interaction in the activity. e.g. You might ask participants to reflect on and respond to others’ contributions in a discussion forum by a certain date.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22. Related resources
Best practices for mobile-friendly courses – guide from Blackboard on getting started designing for mobile learning
https://www.ole.bris.ac.uk/bbcswebdav/xid-4197009_3

Copyright guidance – Library page
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/library/using/printing/copyright.html

JISC Guide: Using assistive and accessible technology in teaching and learning

Creating effective and accessible content - University guidance, which includes writing for the web, structure of web pages, links and navigation, and using images:
http://www.bris.ac.uk/web/guide/bestpractice/basics.html

Creative Commons – for content you can re-use
http://search.creativecommons.org/

Jisc Legal – Copyright Law for e-learning authors
http://jiscleg.al/Copyrightlawelearningauthors

23. Glossary

Content area
Resources and activities in Blackboard are organised in Content areas, which are listed in the course menu. When edit mode is switched on, Content areas can be created by clicking on the + sign in the top left of the menu

Control Panel
The central access point for course management functions. You can manage the course style, course tools, and users from this area. Students do not see the Control Panel.

Course entry point
The first page users see when they log in to a course
24. Planning template

The following questions are designed to help you start planning your course. You may need additional sheets of paper or could do this in a Word document on your computer.

What are the aims of your course?

What aspects of student learning will you address through Blackboard?

What type of tasks are students going to do?
e.g. accessing readings, completing online tests, participating in online discussion?

What tools are you going to use?
e.g. Discussion Forum, Announcements, blog etc

Draft your course layout
Start by listing the items in the course menu, then list the folders / sub-folders in each Content area. How will the folders be organised? E.g. by topic, week, person?

Write some brief instructions for students and an overall course map