10 STEPS TO BLACKBOARD SUCCESS

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Over the past decade, educators have been searching for new teaching techniques involving the Internet. Initially educators worked closely with a technology department to develop a class web site. For various reasons, educators struggled independently to learn HTML codes and web software packages to create and update their web sites. Most educators found to this to be an overwhelming task added to their regular class preparation. Companies have developed several classroom management templates to help teachers set-up their classes in a easy fashion. Blackboard is popular software designed for this purpose. The educator needs to examine ten steps to provide a smooth transition into the Internet environment.

Educators must decide the goals and purpose that the Internet provides for their students. Many questions need to be considered such as:
- How often do the students have internet access?
- What is the speed of the Internet connection?
- Is there technology support?
- Are the students independent workers?
- Do you plan on having group assignments?
- Will the class be completely online?
- Will the features of Blackboard meet my needs?

After deciding that the move to the web is a good choice for your class, the next step is to get started as quickly and simply as possible. An easy way to get started with Blackboard is to pick a publishing company that provides Blackboard free with a new textbook purchase. Publishers provide this option as a textbook supplement to simplify the educator's transition onto the internet but also to create a money flow. This service is usually bundled free with a new textbook but costs $15/student if purchased separately. Once the site has been created, educators are more reluctant to change textbooks and create another class web site. Either through their web site or their representatives, publishing companies provide a list of supplements for each textbook – including the Blackboard option.

The publishing company will set-up the site and provide resource materials to accompany the text. Resource materials include test banks, web links, projects, interactive activities and often the entire textbook. The provided materials can be customized by the teacher. Students are provided with booklets and codes to create individual accounts.

Educators will use the template to add specifics about contact information, syllabus, day-to-day schedule, and additional web links. This transition is usually completed with a copy-and-paste method from a word processing document. What is great about providing this information online is it can be constantly updated.

Now you have the site created and your students have their codes. Before creating their Blackboard account, students need an email address, school's zip code, a login name and password. If the school does not provide students with email addresses, then set-up accounts with free service from Hotmail or Yahoo. In order to avoid future confusion, student login names should be standardized to be last name-first initial in lower case letters (Mary Smith would have a login as smithm). Students will need to individually create a password that they can easily memorize – once again use lower case. Students are given only one code so it is important that they are careful when creating their accounts. I would strongly suggest that the first registration into Blackboard be done slowly in a classroom furnished with individual computers. Keep students together at each step to avoid problems. After the students have created their accounts have them log out and then log back in as practice. Students often forget their login names and/or passwords. By keeping everything lower case and standardizing the login format, this structure will minimize problems.

After practicing logging in and out of Blackboard, encourage the students to explore the environment. Provide an easy practice test worth 0 points to introduce the testing methods. The test bank is available to create tests in multiple choice and essay formats. Your own questions can be added to the test bank. After the test has been completed, students can check their scores in Blackboard's gradebook.

If you test on Blackboard, rules are needed to minimize connection problems. First students need to be on a computer with a reliable internet connection because once the test is started it must be completed. If the connection is terminated, students cannot re-start the test. After the test is finished, have students print results page as an added backup that the test was taken. When using computers, technological problems happen so I permit one test pass per term. This means that one test can be missed without penalty during the term.

The educator can use Blackboard's gradebook feature to do an item test analysis, to summarize student scores, and to export the gradebook into a spreadsheet like Excel. The item test analysis provides the instructor with areas of weakness. Student summaries can be printed and sent to parents. When exporting the gradebook, all features of the spreadsheet can be used for record keeping.

Another feature of Blackboard is easy communication. Participants can interact asynchronously via email and discussion boards. In real time, online chats and virtual classroom options are available. In order to encourage online communication, assignments need to require the use of these tools.

Final considerations before committing to the Blackboard environment are intellectual property rights and its transferability to other platforms. Many times publishing companies consider any writings or research posted on the web as "published" and will not publish in a future paper journal. In case you change textbooks, conversion to another platform, such as WebCT, needs to be considered.

In summary, these ten steps need to be considered to provide a smooth transition into the Blackboard environment.

1. Determine goals/purpose for using Blackboard
2. Find a textbook that supports Blackboard
3. Adopt a text through publisher's representative
   a. Online – sets up framework for particular text
   b. Packaged student codes with new texts (get ISBN) or $15 to add to used text
4. Customize template with your information
   a. Your contact information
   b. Syllabus
   c. Day-To-Day
   d. External Links
5. Register students
   a. Registration Handouts
   b. Email addresses
   c. Zip code – school's zip code
   d. Login and password lower case (lastnamett for login name)
6. Make an initial quiz for practice
   a. Test bank (Multiple choice, essay, etc.)
   b. Points per problem (for practice tests 0 points/question)
   c. Posting times
7. Create rules for taking quiz
   a. Get on a reliable computer with Internet connection
   b. Once started, must finish
   c. Print results page for proof
   d. One pass per term for problems
8. Gradebook
   a. Item Analysis
   b. Student summary
   c. Export to spreadsheet
   d. Changing scores
9. Communication
   a. Asynchronous (Email and Discussion Boards)
   b. Synchronous (Virtual classroom and Online Chats)
10. Considerations
   a. Intellectual Property Rights
   b. Transferability to other platforms

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