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What's New in NYU Blackboard?

By **Ethan Ehrenberg**

This fall, Information Technology Services (ITS) upgraded the NYU Blackboard system to version 6.0. For those who do not already know, Blackboard is the primary course management software system used by almost every school at the University, and on many campuses across the U.S. and worldwide.

Blackboard allows faculty to distribute course content and organize out-of-class communication using the Internet. The system combines many online tools and resources, including e-mail, chat, streaming video, and content pages, and helps faculty organize them for individual academic courses using a simple web template.

By incorporating a wide variety of web-based technologies while requiring virtually no technical expertise, Blackboard empowers instructors to significantly enhance learning through use of the Web without the usual technical barriers to doing so. Over the past several years, ITS Faculty Technology Center staff have introduced a great many NYU faculty members to Blackboard. As we often tell first-time users, "If you can put an attachment in e-mail, you can use Blackboard." Recent usability numbers seem to testify to the system's powerful combination of tools and relative ease-of-use. At last count, there were over 2,700 individual NYU class sections using Blackboard, representing approximately 2,000 instructors and 30,000 students.

Ease-of-use notwithstanding, Blackboard is actually a very sophisticated learning tool. Version 6.0 of the software offers expanded features and adds customizability over previous versions, making it an even more effective and flexible instructional tool.

Some of the more significant enhancements are the ability to completely customize the main navigational menu, the ability to link internally to other content areas, folders, and items, and the ability to copy course material from one course to another under the same instructor. The customizable Course Menu allows instructors to name areas as they please (e.g., "Current Event Readings" instead of "Course Documents"), choose between two presentational layout designs (buttons or text),

and link to specific URLs, course areas, or tools.

With the Course Link feature, instructors can add links between different areas or tools within a given course. This feature can cut down on uploading time since it is now only necessary to upload an item once, regardless of how many times it is linked in Blackboard, and can expand organizational possibilities (for example, by including a Reference area that combines content links from various document sections).

Also, with the Course Copy feature, instructors teaching multiple Blackboard courses can copy content between these different courses. This has the potential not only to reduce uploading time, but, perhaps more significantly, to facilitate content sharing and encourage collaboration across courses, colleagues, and entire departments.

These improvements are accompanied by a host of others, such as new standard features (e.g., the inclusion of math and statistics equation editors in all content, assessment, and collaboration areas), additional flexibility (e.g., the ability to link to content, including tests, URLs, and items in all content areas) and technology upgrades (e.g., expanded Virtual Classroom and Gradebook functionality). The many new features and improvements that have been added to Blackboard version 6.0 will be particularly useful to intermediate and advanced users, without sacrificing any of the straightforwardness of the original interface, which makes the system so accessible to beginners.

Initial Glitches—Solved!

As is often the case when a large, complex application system is being modified, the upgrade to version 6.0 was not achieved without some initial difficulties and inconveniences. Most significant was the noticeably slow performance of the new system when it was first deployed.

In response, ITS, and the staff of eServices in particular, worked with Blackboard, Inc. to locate the cause of the problem and then to devise a solution. Within a few weeks, the system slow-downs were cured, resulting in a very fast, reliable NYU Blackboard upgrade.

Online Help, Training & Support

In addition to the system upgrade, ITS is also redesigning the NYU Blackboard help and support options, with several new initiatives spearheaded by the Faculty Technology Center (FTC). The first of these is a completely new style of training workshop. With the view that people tend to learn software applications most effectively by doing rather than watching, the FTC has re-tooled all of its NYU Blackboard workshops to be "hands-on", with participants actually working on their own course sites during the session.

These workshops take advantage of the new state-of-the-art, hands-on classroom facilities located at NYU's new 194 Mercer Street complex. The training sessions introduce newcomers and returning NYU Blackboard "instructors" to the many features and tools of Blackboard v.6 and review some "Best Practice" strategies for organizing courses and course content. Attendees then complete several key Blackboard tasks within the same session, with technical assistants standing by to provide support.

An important component of these workshops is the use of a model Blackboard course generated by the FTC, which serves as an example of how to use NYU Blackboard and contains a wealth of reference articles and information about using the system to enhance learning. The course can be accessed by following the instructions at <http://www.nyu.edu/its/ftc/supported/links/blackboard/about/demo.html>.

During the first part of the Fall 2003 semester, the FTC offered these hands-on workshops for both beginners and experienced users of Blackboard, focusing on the new enhancements of version 6.0. Currently, the FTC is in the process of scheduling more advanced topics and targeted sessions for specific departments. Anyone interested in arranging a workshop session should visit the ITS Classes page at <http://www.nyu.edu/its/classes/> and follow the instructions.

The other major NYU Blackboard help initiative involves a complete overhaul of the online help and support options. The first step in this renovation was to revise and expand the information in the Blackboard section of the ITS "FAQs and How To's" web pages to reflect the new features of version 6.0 and to develop an area for Student FAQ's. These pages can be found at <http://www.nyu.edu/its/faq/blackboard/> or by simply clicking the Help button at the top of any web page within NYU Blackboard. There are plans underway to work with ITS Client Services to transform this online help area into a more searchable troubleshooting resource, featuring a table of contents, an index, and a keyword search capability.

The FTC is also expanding its own NYU Blackboard online help for faculty at <http://www.nyu.edu/its/ftc/blackboard/>, as part of a larger site redesign. With its upcoming release, this help area will include new Quick Start Guides, an introductory tour, and a brand new tutorial section, which will walk Blackboard novices through a sequential learning path from beginner to intermediate, with easy-to-follow instructions, screenshots, helpful hints, and desktop video demonstrations of each step.

There is also a reference section with articles and best practice advice, contact information for further assistance, links to student help resources, and much more. This area will continue to be enhanced throughout the coming year.

All of these efforts are part of an overall ITS strategy to support systems that enable the NYU community not only to use new technologies, but to use them well, and to incorporate systems such as NYU Blackboard in a way that empowers good teaching and has a lasting positive effect on learning. We are always interested in your feedback; please share your comments with us by sending e-mail to its.ftc@nyu.edu.

Author Biography

Ethan Ehrenberg is an Instructional Technology Specialist at the ITS Faculty Technology Center. He can be reached at ethan.ehrenberg@nyu.edu.

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