

Enhancing Participatory Learning with NYU Blackboard

By Derrick Bell
derrick.bell@nyu.edu

Over the past three decades, personal computers have revolutionized everything—education included. There are few administrative functions in the modern university that have not been substantially altered by the computer. Even exams can now be administered via computer, thus rendering obsolete the time-honored blue book and the sore eyes of countless teachers who labored long hours to decipher often inscrutable student exam answers. Now, the challenge for educators is how to utilize this digital revolution to successfully advance the learning process.

Surely, I am not the only teacher who has recognized that the traditional final exam, particularly those that bar students from using their textbooks or notes, favors those students who possess good memories, swiftly functioning analytical skills, and smooth writing styles—none of which are required in order for a student to have a thorough understanding of the course content. Additionally, final exams are often graded on a curve with the intention of making grades consistent across sections of the same course, a practice that can further distort our measurement of a student's actual knowledge of content.

To better evaluate those students whose mastery of a course is greater than their ability to convey it on final exams, I adopted the practice many years ago of basing final grades on a

series of papers that students wrote and submitted throughout the semester. Rather than answer questions, they wrote essays or reflections offering their views on the various components of the course. The essays turned in following one class were used as the subject of discussion at the next.

This procedure was effective, but required a great deal of sifting through papers and highlighting of comments for exploration at the next class. Within each week's shower of papers, some were very good, reflecting thought based on obvious knowledge of the subject matter. There were also, alas, papers written in haste in the hope that they would become lost in the shuffle. Even so, in determining final grades, I could use each student's understanding of the course as reflected in their writings, in addition to their class preparation and participation. The evaluation process, while arduous, was more interesting than the marathon grind of reviewing what each student wrote about the same series of final exam questions.

For me, the computer has changed this essay-oriented teaching and grading approach for the better. Early on, staff members of the NYU School of Law's information technology department spent many hours designing and launching a course website with provisions for me to post assignments, cases, and other reading materials. This was a convenience, but the website also provided an area

where each week, students could post their essay-reflections. Once these were posted, students knew that their classmates would have access to their essays and could, if they wished, post responses and critiques.

What a difference it made. Peer pressure was more effective than faculty admonishment. Few students are willing to appear stupid and unprepared to their classmates. The essays were more thoughtful, discussing in real depth the law and policies underlying given issues. The topics became more adventuresome, and sometimes controversial, as students set out in writing views they had not expressed in class. Some essays were better than others, but very few were written in the hope that they would be lost in the paper chase. And, motivated by the posted essays, students began out-of-class dialogues, often raising perspectives about the subject matter beyond those discussed in class and, not infrequently, bringing to the subject facts and writings of which I was not aware. We were, quite literally, learning from one another by teaching one another—the ideal form of learning.

Then, a few years ago, NYU's Information Technology Services made available the NYU Blackboard course management system. Blackboard allows the creation and administration of course content without the need to purchase or learn a full-fledged web-editing program. It also provides access to numerous

interactive tools, such as discussion boards, email lists, and online assessments, that would otherwise be rather difficult to set up.

With the adoption of Blackboard, I reluctantly had to abandon the website tailor-made for my courses, but the system does have a wider selection of components and is equally accessible from Macintosh and Windows computers. Once a Blackboard website for a course is established, an instructor can make it available to students and teaching assistants (TAs) who are enrolled or otherwise authorized to access the course through the Academics tab on NYUHome.

In addition to facilitating the sharing of essay-reflections, Blackboard enables me to contact students in a course prior to the first class. Detailed course instructions and readings are available under a section titled "Course Readings," and I also post a list of hypothetical or actual cases that students will brief, argue, discuss, and decide upon during the course. I ask each student to select three cases on which he or she would like to work in order of priority, a request that leads students to review a good portion of the course content before the course even begins. Using their choices as a guide, I assign students to three- or four-person "hypo" (hypothetical) teams.

By the first class, the course docket or schedule is already set. The teams, an advocate for each side and a chief justice to moderate the argument, review the material I have posted and supplement them with cases and other articles downloaded from one of the Internet databases, such as Westlaw or Lexis. They prepare briefs and bench memos that are posted in another section of Blackboard days before the class meets. The rest of the class can also read the briefs online or download and print them. The briefs and bench memos contain much of the material available in textbooks or case manuals, but now the applicable

law and policy issues are interpreted by fellow students, who stand before the class and make their points in oral arguments subject to the often tough questions posed by their classmates. Student teams devote many hours to their presentations and many of them utilize PowerPoint and video to give sparkle to their presentations.

With so much preparation shared via Blackboard, each course session becomes less of a class and more of an event. Attendance and involvement are much greater than would be the case were I to stand before them and lecture or try to get a discussion going. The discussion during the presentations is always stimulating and often heated when the issue is controversial. The votes can be close but, win or lose, the case arguments are about learning, and sharing what you have learned with others. In applying for a TA position with my course next year, one student explained that his main motivation was his desire "to contribute to what I think is one of the few potentially transformative experiences available at law school. I would like to help students from different academic backgrounds, life experiences, and political persuasions to better understand one another."

In my constitutional law class of over 100 students, there are often 40 or 50 essay-reflections (we now call them op-eds) posted after each class. Many of them exceed 1,000 words and often reflect outside research. Posting these op-eds to the NYU Blackboard website, often in the wee hours of the morning, students gain a degree of control over their participation. In addition to the op-ed section for each case, we have a special "Global Op-ed" section of the website where students can post articles commenting on our case discussions, or essays they have written that don't fit into any of the case sections but offer views the students wish to share. While no credit is promised for these postings, students post a few dozen each week.

Here is what one student said about the op-ed writing and presentation process: "The first time I wrote an op-ed for Professor Bell's class, I was (without any exaggeration) terrified. Nothing I had written or even published in the past had ever gone before a gauntlet of 95 sharp law students, 19 TAs and one legendary law professor. I think I edited my 800 or so words at least 10 times... What I learned, slowly, was to listen, read, read again, and think through the topics we tackled. Just when I thought I had a grip on an issue, a classmate would bring up another facet that undercut my foundation. Though I often disagreed with various viewpoints, absorbing all of them was the key to honing my own."

In his book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain, Director of NYU's Center for Teaching Excellence, reports that people tend to learn most effectively (in ways that make a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on the way they think, act, or feel) when (1) they are trying to solve problems...or create something new that they find intriguing, beautiful, and/or important; (2) they are able to do so in a challenging yet supportive environment in which they can feel a sense of control over their own education; (3) they can work collaboratively with other learners to grapple with the problems; (4) they believe that their work will be considered fairly and honestly; and (5) they can try, fail, and receive feedback from expert learners in advance of and separate from any summative judgment of their efforts.¹

Ken Bain has visited my class on a few occasions and he and his staff have made several helpful suggestions. One of them was to permit students to do a mid-semester evaluation of the course. On an anonymous basis, they can tell me what they like about the course and what they would like to see changed. I then publish on Blackboard a summary of their comments and discuss them

Continued on p. 8 >>

1. Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

tool, with 70% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.

- 14% used the Test and Survey tool, with 50% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.
- 9% used the Collaboration tool, with 41% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.

SUPPORT & TRAINING

- 77% of respondents indicated that they had used ITS support for enrollment, activation, and access, with 75% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.
- 74% had used ITS support for how-to and general use questions, with 72% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.
- 41% had used ITS phone support, with 76% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.
- 44% had used ITS email support, with 61% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.
- 43% had used ITS online support, with 62% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.

- 27% had used ITS training workshops support, with 67% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.
- 20% had used ITS in-person support, with 80% of these indicating that it was either very useful or useful.

For training areas that would be most helpful in the future:

- 51% of respondents indicated advanced features
- 16% indicated integrating multimedia
- 13% indicated integrating library resources
- 7% indicated getting started
- 7% indicated troubleshooting
- 6% indicated faculty case studies

FUTURE ENHANCEMENTS Of the future enhancements listed in the survey, the following received the highest approval ratings:

- 75% of respondents rated the ability to copy a previous semester's course content to a new course, directly from the

Control Panel, as very important or important.²

- 67% rated the ability to submit end-of-semester course evaluations and final grades as very important or important.³
- 63% rated the ability to research cases of suspected plagiarism as very important or important.⁴
- 49% rated the ability for students to view Blackboard content offline on their personal computers as very important or important.

OVERALL SATISFACTION For overall personal satisfaction with NYU Blackboard:

- 82% of respondents reported being very satisfied or satisfied
- 98.5% of all respondents reported that they planned to use NYU Blackboard in future semesters

Ethan Ehrenberg is a Faculty Technology Specialist at ITS' Faculty Technology Services Center.

2. This process was enabled system-wide in August 2005. For more information on how to use this new feature, see <http://www.nyu.edu/its/ftc/blackboard/tutorial/whatsnew/bblocks/coursecopy.html>.

3. ITS is currently investigating a solution for this feature.

4. ITS is also currently investigating a solution for this feature.

>> Continued from p. 6

during class. Much of what I get is quite complimentary, some is critical, and there are suggestions that I have integrated into the course.

The availability of Blackboard at NYU is one of many resources that make teaching here so rewarding. When, after a dozen years of civil rights practice, I was offered the opportunity to teach law, I accepted because it offered an opportunity to do research and writing. After a few years of teaching, I recognized the challenge of providing course structures that enabled students to do what most of us find most satis-

fying about the profession. Although what I call a "participatory learning process" would be possible without Blackboard, or even without computers, the presence of both greatly enhance my courses. Blackboard provides a vehicle that facilitates my effort to meet the challenge posed by Paulo Freire and often quoted in my writings on teaching, namely that: "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students."²

Editor's Note

On November 8, 2005, NYU's Center for Teaching Excellence will host a workshop by Professor Bell entitled *Students Teaching Students*. The session "will help participants explore ways they might utilize [Professor Bell's] highly successful participatory learning model..." For details, including registration information, visit <http://www.nyu.edu/cte/registration.html>.

Derrick Bell is a Visiting Professor at the NYU School of Law.

2. Freire, Paulo, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 2nd ed. New York: Continuum, 1981.