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Lounge Lizards Online: Learning in a Blackboard Virtual Student Lounge¹

By [Marilyn Lawrence](#)

When I enrolled in Tisha Bender's course on web-assisted teaching, *Online Institute 5*, sponsored in January 2002 by NYU's Center for Teaching Excellence, I was a skeptic. As a recent Ph.D., I knew that it was necessary to be familiar with teaching technologies in order to be a viable candidate in a tough academic job market. I was not convinced, however, of the true effectiveness of web-assisted teaching, and suspected that much of what was offered on course websites—syllabi, lecture notes, reading assignments—could be more easily disseminated in paper form, without investing the time necessary to create a website. I entered Tisha's course with a desire to discover what a website could do for my class that the good old chalkboard and photocopier could not.

Tisha's course was conducted entirely online. We met on the initial day to introduce ourselves to each other, but for the remainder of the course we logged in from our individual computers. By contrast, the course I was to teach during the spring 2002 semester, "Arthurian Legend," a bread-and-butter course for the NYU College of Arts & Science's Medieval and Renaissance Center, was in many respects a typical, twentieth-century undergraduate course: held in a classroom, punctuated by exams and written papers, populated by students who read books printed on paper. How could twenty-first-century technologies facilitate the learning of medieval literature in a traditional classroom set-up?

By the end of Tisha's three-week course, I was a convert. Yes, there were many non-interactive aspects of Blackboard that simply replicated in-class handouts. But there were also exciting interactive features—in particular the Discussion Forums and Group Pages—that showed promise for enhancement of learning. I was inspired to adapt them to my traditional course, to facilitate learning both outside and inside the classroom.

On the first week of classes, I launched my course's website, in which I had included a Virtual Student Lounge. This was an informal Blackboard discussion forum open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the entirety of the semester. An asynchronous forum, students could log in and post messages at any time of the day or night, from wherever they pleased. In order to establish a casual tone, welcoming to general student discussion, I outlined few parameters, merely requesting that they "respect others in the class" and that they keep their "discussion and language civil." Only the first week's posting—an introduction of themselves to their classmates—was required; thereafter all postings were voluntary.² I sought to create a place where students could congregate outside the classroom and discuss issues of importance to them—whether academic or personal—unhindered by my intervention and by the more rigid guidelines of the course's other discussion forums.

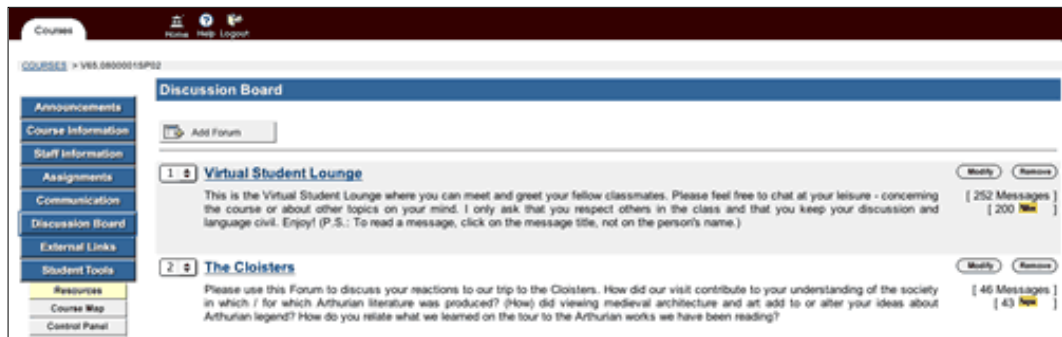


Figure #1 - The Virtual Student Lounge in the Blackboard Interface

The Virtual Student Lounge proved to be extremely popular: my class of thirty-five students posted some one hundred messages in the first two weeks alone. Despite a heavy course load, which included weekly web assignments and one hundred to one hundred and fifty pages of medieval literature to read a week, students had posted over two hundred and fifty messages in the Lounge by the semester's end. Since students were free to write on any subject they liked, I was braced for any sort of "lounge talk" that might arise, such as complaints about the work load or stories of people's personal lives. Instead, I found that the students chose to focus on academic topics related to the medieval texts we were reading, creating an intellectual lounge that supplemented the discussions held in class.

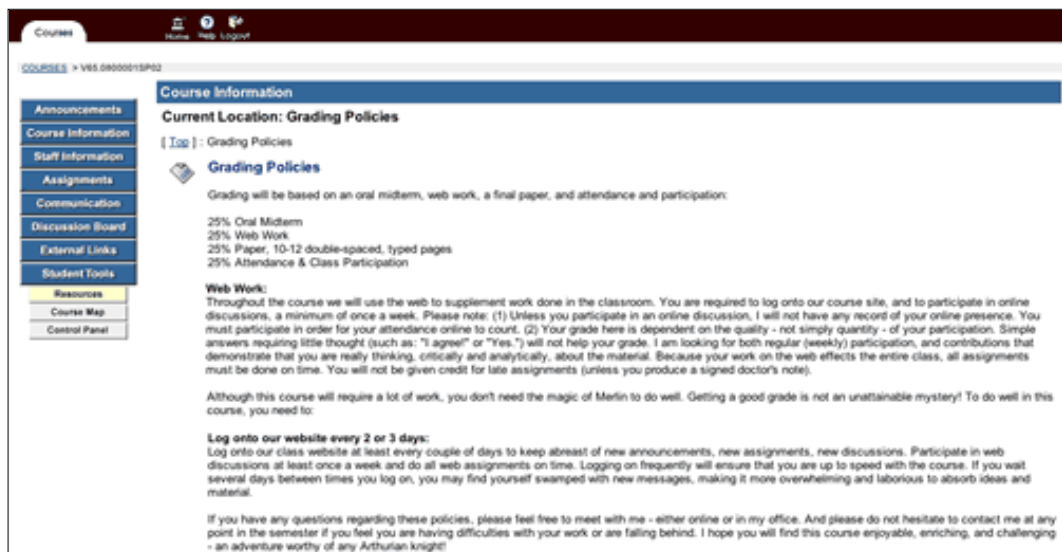


Figure #2 - Course Grading Policies Page

Students centered their discussions on Arthurian texts, exploring genealogical intricacies of the Arthurian world, methods for teaching Arthurian works (a topic begun by some future teachers in the class), feminism, rhetorical techniques, differing literary styles, various Arthurian themes, translation, parody, comparison of medieval literature and Greek mythology, the chivalric code, and Arthurian iconography, among other issues.

In their end-of-semester evaluations of the website, students remarked upon this use of the Lounge:

- "Good to hear what people didn't have a chance to say in class."
- "Very good! Could freely talk about questions and ideas that came up when doing the readings. Good way to explore insights without taking up class time."

I encouraged use of the Lounge by integrating Lounge conversations into lectures, and frequently used Lounge postings to initiate classroom conversations. I aimed to foster a sense that a student must regularly participate in or at least read the Lounge postings to engage fully in the course. The Lounge created a sense of community, and I found that discussion both in the classroom and online was energized and enriched by students' interactions in the Lounge. Students reported that they found this "Lounge community" both stimulating and enjoyable:

- "Definitely so helpful. We used this to discuss and argue about problems, questions concerning the texts, and just to rant."
- "[I liked best] getting to know my peers and learning about why they took the course and how their understanding about Arthurian legend has changed in the course of the semester."
- "Reading others' opinion that helped me out the most."
- "Gave me a chance to see how other people reacted to the trips and ideas. It brought up a lot of good points that I didn't necessarily think of."

Moreover, I discovered that the students who participated most in the Lounge were not necessarily the most vocal students during class sessions. The Lounge gave students who were more hesitant or slower to speak in public some because of shyness or difficulty grappling with English as a second language a place to think through issues and respond to classmates at their own pace, using dictionaries and other resources, if necessary. The asynchronous nature of the Lounge also enabled students to participate in conversations according to their own schedules. Night owls whose minds were focused sharply on Arthurian legend in the wee hours, but who were groggier during our morning class, could still participate productively in online discussions.



Figure #3 - Sample Discussion Board Topic Threads



Figure #4 - Sample Discussion Board Messages

A continuum was established: I integrated conversations that students began in the Lounge into my classroom teaching; students continued Lounge conversations in classroom discussions; in the Lounge, students initiated or continued topics that we did not have time to address or finish in class. The Lounge enabled and encouraged students to work together to pursue topics of interest beyond the scope of the course's syllabus. Such a forum was particularly important in "Arthurian Legend," a general "core" course where it was simply not possible to cover all facets of the subject. For example, because of the specific focus of our classroom work on Chr tien de Troyes's *Yvain, or The Knight with the Lion*, we regrettably ran out of time to talk about the meaning of *Yvain's* lion. Immediately following the class, a student began an online conversation in the Virtual Lounge on the symbolism

and role of the lion, a discussion that continued for some twenty postings!

The Lounge also helped me as a teacher better to tailor classroom discussions to students' needs and interests. On the eve of a class devoted to Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, I logged into the Lounge and discovered that students were troubled and confused by what they perceived to be blatant racism in the beginning of the romance an issue I had not even thought to cover in my lecture or subsequent class discussion. I immediately reworked my lesson plan to address the issue of racism which, thanks to the Lounge, I had discovered was hindering their understanding and appreciation of the work.

The Lounge not only enabled me to teach more effectively, it also encouraged students to teach themselves. In the Lounge, I sought to establish a space where students could actively learn with minimal intervention from the instructor. After setting up the Lounge in the first week, I rarely interceded in the students' discussions. Although I monitored the postings and incorporated them into classroom discussion, I generally refrained from posting messages in the Lounge in order to give students the freedom to talk and debate, to question and comment, unhindered by the presence of the professor. I had found that students tended to read my messages as "authoritative" and my comments or questions on postings as "approval" or "disapproval."

Once I had set up the Lounge that first week with clear and straightforward instructions on its use and purpose, the forum was off and running, flourishing in the capable hands of my students. It was admittedly a pleasure and a relief to discover that minimal participation on my part as professor both fostered a forum for students to learn and develop ideas independently, and helped resolve the problem of an instructor's time limitations (a major concern among the faculty members in Tisha's course).

Of course students perceived some drawbacks to the Lounge and to the mandatory use of Blackboard in general. In their evaluations, students complained most about the time demands of web assignments, occasional technological glitches they encountered (e.g., with attachments), difficulty accessing computers, and particularly the lack of high-speed connections on home computers or in dormitories:

- "I seldom had time to visit and post as much as I'd have liked. But I like the fact it was there ... Signing in requires me to open three windows first. On a bad night, it might take me 15 minutes to load the page (dial up)."
- "Perhaps it's easier when using a computer with a faster connection, but for a regular home computer, it was a pain to post regularly."
- "I do not have Internet access at home so going to the computer lab multiple times a week, waiting in line and barely having time to post was a big inconvenience for me."

Also, despite increasing integration of technology into teaching and indeed into all areas of life a couple of students claimed "web-aversion syndrome." One student remarked: "It is such a foreign medium... [It] shouldn't be as emphasized as it was." Perhaps I would have agreed with that student before taking NYU's *Online Institute 5* course, but the marked impact Blackboard had on my students' development as readers, writers, and thinkers has convinced me of the benefits of using technology to supplement traditional classroom teaching. Students' comments affirm my own observation of their intellectual progress and growth. Indeed, the significant contribution that students found web work made to their learning experience promises a bright future for web-assisted teaching:

- "I think it supplemented my learning with different viewpoints, and gave me more opportunities to discuss everything."
- "I thought about the material more than I would have ... I really had a wonderful learning experience."
- "The website kept me moving forward in the class."
- "It has definitely helped me with my writing ... I really enjoyed this class. I felt that I learned a lot, and that all the work I did had a purpose. I had lots of fun, and wish all my classes were this interesting."
- "This class rocked. I sometimes thought of it as a break from my other classes, but I still think I learned more from this class than almost any other I've taken at NYU."

Such student comments suggest that interactive discussion forums like Virtual Student Lounges will soon no longer be perceived as "foreign," but rather welcomed by lounge lizards campus-wide as virtually the most stimulating places to hang out.

Footnotes

1. I would like to thank Nancy Freeman Regalado, Professor of French at NYU, who, as Director of the Medieval and Renaissance Studies Program at the time I taught this course, offered boundless enthusiasm and encouragement for my project. I would also like to thank Tisha Bender, whose *Online Institute 5* course provided inspiration and a model for my use of Blackboard, and specifically for my Virtual Student Lounge.
2. Although posting on the Virtual Student Lounge after the first week was voluntary, regular participation on the Web was required, and comprised twenty-five percent of each student's final course grade. There was one obligatory web assignment per week participation in a discussion forum on a specific topic or in one of the online Writers' Workshops that I created with Blackboard's Group Pages. After the first week of classes, participation in the Virtual Student Lounge would earn students participation points, but would not fulfill the required web assignment stipulated for that week.

Author Biography

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