Recommendation Report

For this project, my group and I decided to analyze the accessibility of Blackboard, the teaching platform Michigan Tech recently replaced by Canvas. Our concern was the conflicting use of it by teachers and students, and how to make it more efficient and intuitive. We looked into several different problems, resources available, and ended with a list of recommendations for improvement.

For this report, I wrote up the transmittal letter and much of our research, taking the results of interviews and Blackboard usage research my group members did and compiling it into this report. I also took part in many group discussion meetings in which we discussed our results and decided upon recommendations.
March 25, 2010

Ms. Christy Oslund, Coordinator of Student Disability Services
Michigan Technological University
1400 Townsend Drive
Houghton, MI 49931

Dear Ms. Oslund,

Attached is our Recommendation Report, a part of the Report Set Writing Cycle assignment on university accessibility. This document was created regarding the research done and recommendation created on our topic of campus accessibility: Blackboard accessibility.

This report recommends a solution to our campus accessibility problem after highlighting and identifying the problem, as well as providing and explaining different possible solutions and finally summarizing what we have found. We hope that you will find it useful in confirming our choice in topic of university accessibility a worthwhile project for the University to pursue.

We would like to thank you for taking the time to introduce the topic of campus accessibility to us. We’d also like to thank Mr. Jim Rudkin and Ms. Casey Rudkin, as they both took time to discuss the research process with us.

Thank you, Ms. Oslund, for taking the time to consider our Recommendation Report. If you have any questions or suggestions, feel free to contact me at ncheikki@mtu.edu, or any of my classmates at their respective email addresses.

Sincerely,

Nora Heikkinen

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Cc: James Rudkin
Making Blackboard Accessible to Students, Faculty, and Staff Campus-wide

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Abstract

This recommendation report provides a proposal to the problems with the use of Blackboard as a teaching aide at Michigan Technological University. This report includes an examination of possible solutions found for the problems. This recommendation can be used to better the campus not only for faculty and staff, but most importantly the students. If put into effect, the recommendation stated in this recommendation report could improve the quality of online class communication and make learning more effective and efficient.
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1. Introduction to Blackboard communication problems

Blackboard is one of the current online teaching resources for students and teachers on Michigan Technological University’s campus. This online tool can enhance a student’s learning experience by increasing the speed of communication and providing a common online location for students to find handouts, lecture slides, test resources, and grades.

Blackboard can also hinder a student by being confusing, incorrectly and inconsistently used, and by leading to misunderstanding. This occurs because it cuts down on verbal communication between teachers and students. The use of Blackboard by teachers isn’t consistent, with some teachers avoiding using it all together.

The problems that arise from Blackboard can be minor, annoying issues to students, to complete misunderstandings that lead to extra work and time. Examples of this would be mis-posted test dates and checking multiple online sites. These are problems for all students, but can be particularly stressful for students suffering from learning disabilities, as they add additional processes to schoolwork. With increased accessibility and understanding of Blackboard, the current students are more likely to continue their education at Michigan Tech. It would also hold as a selling point for potential students, as well as keep Michigan Tech competing with other top universities, who also implement online teaching resources. The focus of this report is to recommend a solution from our proposed solutions to these communication issues.

A portion of the research for this report was conducted as experiential research. The student members of the team were set up as instructors on an experimental online Blackboard course. This allowed them to experience the instructor role on Blackboard. These encounters led to several theories on instructor interaction with Blackboard, which were then further investigated through interviews and research.

1.1 Instructor use of Blackboard

Prior to the fall semester of 2009, the use of Blackboard by instructors was completely voluntary [15]. The tool was available for use by all, but participation was not required. Many instructors began consistently using Blackboard, as it was a convenient online medium to post class documents such as syllabuses, lecture slides, and other handouts for students to access at their leisure. Some professors posted grades as a method for providing feedback on exams, which was especially useful in large lecture classes, such as CH1120 (University Chemistry 1). This is an example where sections are 300 students large, and returning individual exams is time consuming and impractical.

Some professors however, did not begin using Blackboard. There were professors who were already using the Internet to communicate course material to students who used the system they already developed: their personal websites. Now, students had to remember to check multiple websites for their homework. This created headaches and confusion for students, adding unnecessary steps for keeping up online with classes. If all instructors used Blackboard, everything would be consolidated in one online location.
Instructors have mixed feelings about Blackboard. One instructor, Jim Rudkin, found that Blackboard had many nuances that made it annoying to use, as well as time consuming [15]. This professor, however, utilized several features of Blackboard, and found it added to the course for students. Another professor thought that Blackboard was straightforward to use and accomplished the tasks he desired of it [13]. Three individuals with limited instructor roles on Blackboard found it to be straightforward through their jobs as graders and learning center executive coaches. However, they also mentioned that Blackboard had nuances that made it time consuming [14][3][9].

In the fall semester of 2009, Michigan Tech mandated that final grades be posted to Blackboard, effectively requiring all instructors to use Blackboard [15]. Minimal use was required with some instructors using Blackboard for only one purpose all semester: to post the final grade. The consolidation problems remained for students. If all teachers could use Blackboard for their online communication, it would be a powerful organizational tool for students.

1.2 Lack of knowledge about Blackboard support

One of the reasons not all instructors use Blackboard is the lack of knowledge about the support available for Blackboard, both from forums and staff. When asked, Dennis Lewandowski, a math professor at the school, said he was aware that support existed for Blackboard, but not what they were [13]. Another interview subject stated that he was aware that support existed, but that he would be hesitant to use it, instead choosing to solve the problem through trial and error [14]. Informing instructors about the available support may be the first step in increasing the number of instructors who actively use Blackboard.

1.2.1 Technical support staff at Michigan Technological University

Currently, Thomas Freeman, provides Blackboard support to the University. He can be reached by sending an email to courses@mtu.edu and has an office in room 231 of the J.R. Van Pelt and Opie Library [7]. He can be reached by phone or email to set up an appointment for training or to resolve issues with Blackboard [7]. One instructor knew that support staff existed, but not how to contact him [3]. To find out about it, the information must be sought out on Blackboard by instructors, by going to the Blackboard at Michigan Tech, Blackboard and WebCT support and discussion course when logged in to Blackboard [7]. If more teachers knew staff is available to answer questions and familiarize them with the system, they may be more likely to keep working with Blackboard.

1.2.2 Resources and tutorials

There are also online resources available for Blackboard. Tutorials and instruction sets are available for instruction on the Blackboard site when logged on, and on the website
Tutorials can be run online or printed off and followed along on paper. There are also guides for handling common problems, and ways to increase Blackboard use [13]. Although these resources are obtainable, instructors are unaware of online resources specifically. This is because they must be individually sought out and are not advertised [13][9].

When asked, several instructors expressed an unwillingness to take tutorials [13][14][3]. Blackboard may seem intuitive, and professors are busy individuals who may not have time to take tutorials. However, these tutorials were taken during the experiential research and are generally short (around five minutes) and straightforward. More awareness about the tools available will allow for increased utilization of Blackboard by instructors and students.

2. **Student issues**

Some complaints that students have voiced have been around professors using multiple websites to communicate course material. Most of the complaints have been centered on two main problems, the first being the professor is still using their personal website for most of the course material [10][11]. The second complaint is having to use the website that compliments the course book [3][6]. Another problem addressed is keeping track of files on Blackboard. All are valid problems concerning the accessibility of Blackboard.

2.1 **Students check multiple websites**

Prior to Blackboard and still after its introduction, some professors use their own webpage to pass along course materials. Since Michigan Tech has deployed Blackboard Learning System, there is very little need for this. The main complaint that students have with this is that there are too many places to look for information [10][11]. This is especially difficult when professors do not link their personal webpage to Blackboard. Without a link on Blackboard, students are forced to sift through old emails, searching for that link. If professors who still would like to use their personal website would simply supply a link to it on Blackboard, there would be less confusion on where to go or what to do for class.

Another complaint that students have expressed is using different software learning suites [12][5]. Blackboard is designed to be the main source of communication for class with quizzes, tests, and even a place to turn in assignments. When professors use the learning suite that comes with the course book, confusion can occur. When professors do not take the time to link the page in Blackboard, it only adds to the students’ problem of multiple sources of online information.

2.2 **Students can not find files**

Other reoccurring problems students voiced in regards to Blackboard are that they cannot find class files or that Blackboard has “ate my homework” [12][10][11].

2.2.1 **Consistency**
When professors place class files in obscure places within Blackboard, it makes it difficult for students to find them. This is especially true if professors normally place the assignments on the main page of Blackboard and then decide to use the Assignment functionality of Blackboard without or only informing the students once or twice. Consistency is the most important thing that the students would like to see incorporated into Michigan Tech’s use of Blackboard.

2.2.2 Homework

Blackboard ate my homework! Yes, this does happen, as with any Internet technology you are subject to with the Internet. If there is a loss of a packet during the transmission of the assignment Blackboard could potentially “eat your homework.” As long as students are submitting their assignment a few minutes before the deadline there shouldn’t be any problem. If a problem does occur, this affords the student enough time resubmit the assignment. If the problem happens again they still have enough time to potentially email the professor the assignment and explain them the situation. This complaint is more of a time management issue than a Blackboard issue.

2.3 Solutions to student issues

Professor Myers’ PH1140 class is a perfect example of how to utilize both Blackboard and the course book’s learning suite. Professor Myers placed links right on his main page of Blackboard, to Mastering Physics. This might not seem to be a big deal but when students are trying to remember a longer web address, this relieves stress. Now all the students have to do is log on to Blackboard and all their secondary learning suites are available right there as well. If professors who still would prefer to use their personal website would just simply do this, there would be less confusion on where to go or what to do.

Another improvement would be, as previously stated, to emphasize consistency when professors place files on Blackboard. Also, although Blackboard can lose your files when submit them, students can remedy this with better time management.

3. Web-linked books research

There are textbooks available for professors on Blackboard. These are web-linked so that certain books being used in a class can be integrated online. One example of their use would be for pools of questions from a certain book used in making Blackboard quizzes or tests.

3.1 Problems getting the books

Casey Rudkin, a graduate student professor here at Michigan Tech has been trying to attain a version of Everything’s An Argument to use for one of her classes. This process has taken two weeks so far, and is not close to being finished. Although she was able to contact
the publisher and get a book for free, the book was not compatible with Michigan Tech’s version of Blackboard, which is Blackboard CE 8.0 [15].

Casey then attempted to contact Blackboard directly for the book files, but has not heard back from them. They offer a two-editions-old version of Everything’s An Argument. Blackboard did not offer an estimate for how much these books will cost, but has put in about five hours of research into the problem so far [15].

To access books through Blackboard, one would simply go to the website. After searching and finding for the textbook you want, accessing the course materials takes more time. One would need to fill out a form, and then wait three to four days to obtain information on how to download the textbook. Also, the information received about the book would not include materials such as quizzes and exams, only online reading sections[4].

3.2 Solution to the web-linked books

According to our research, the idea of web-linked books seems to be a helpful response to improving professor-student communication through Blackboard. Blackboard did not accomplish this. The Blackboard company seems to be elusive and time consuming when attempting to attain the books. Unless Michigan Tech’s version of Blackboard is updated, it looks to be a long and steady fight to gain the use of web-linked books.

4. Campus education research

The best way to help standardize Blackboard use while encouraging more professors to utilize the tool is to educate them about Blackboard. Teachers who understand what a powerful tool it is and see the benefits for themselves and their students, see the purpose to Blackboard. By making the support that is available better known, issues that arise with Blackboard can be solved quickly and easily, changing Blackboard into a learning tool rather than a headache.

4.1 Support available

As previously discussed in section 1.2.1 and 1.2.2, Michigan Tech does currently supply Blackboard support in two forms: support staff and online forums. Thomas Freeman is available while online; there are tutorials to troubleshoot issues that arise from Blackboard [7]. All instructors are enrolled automatically in a Blackboard course that supplies discussion forums for instructors to pose questions to one another about Blackboard, and also to find the tutorials. If more instructors knew about these resources, they may be more inclined to not only use them, but also increase their use of Blackboard in general.

4.2 Seminar on Blackboard

Hosting a seminar on Blackboard and its many functions in the weeks prior to a semester starting would provide a medium to instruct instructors. It would give instructors a place to
pose questions and learn about features they may have never known about. This will help, as most instructors who use Blackboard are self-taught.

One instructor expressed interest in going to such a seminar if it was hosted [14][8]. The proposed idea would be to hold three hour-long seminars on Blackboard at varying times, asking instructors to attend at least one. Instructors who already use Blackboard within their courses and want to expand their use would likely attend [14][8]. However, instructors who do not see the benefit of incorporating Blackboard into their course may not be receptive to the idea of an hour-long session on a tool they don't find beneficial. In short, a seminar will only help instructors who are willing to attend.

4.3 Solution to the Blackboard support problem

If the University can take small steps requiring professors to begin using Blackboard, then it slowly will be incorporated into each and every course. Michigan Tech could start by requiring that the course syllabus be posted online, along with the instructor contact information. As all the instructors are exposed to Blackboard, they may see the additional benefits provided by this medium of communication.

Furthermore, the available resources for Blackboard need to be more heavily publicized so instructors know they are available for use. Holding informational seminars prior to the semester can give an opportunity for instructors to learn all together, instead of struggling through the application on their own. Once more instructors know the full potential of Blackboard, its educational scope will be greatly increased, and its role as a communication line between professor and student solidified.

5. Blackboard accessibility solutions

Overall, we found out that there are many ways to make Blackboard more accessible to everyone on the Michigan Tech campus. Currently there are problems with the Blackboard Learning System as a teaching aide on the Michigan Technological University campus and this report lists possible solutions to this problem. This research could be used to better the campus not only for faculty and staff, but most importantly the students. If the solutions stated in this report were put into effect, then they could improve the quality of online Blackboard communication, making it more effective and efficient.

5.1 Solutions

- Instructors should provide links to personal websites or other software learning suites on Blackboard
- Available tutorials, other online resources, and support staff should be advertised
- Instructors should emphasize consistency in placement of class files
- Students should practice time management when working with Blackboard
- The University should continue slowly incorporating an increasing amount of Blackboard use for instructors
• The possible need for upgrading to a newer version of Blackboard

6. **Blackboard accessibility recommendation**

As a research team, we recommend that the University should work to improve their current version of Blackboard. Providing instruction, advertisement, and implementing simple directives will solve Michigan Tech’s Blackboard accessibility problem at a little to no cost. This will increase the accessibility and understanding of Blackboard, and in turn, current students are more likely to continue their education at Michigan Tech. By improving the current version of Blackboard, this would also hold as a selling point for potential students. It would also keep Michigan Tech competing with other top universities while keeping expenses low.

6.1 **Recommendation**

1. **Publicize:**
   To provide more Blackboard support to instructors, the University needs to publicize the fact that there are resources available. Increased awareness can be accomplished by using multiple advertising mediums. An email including links to tutorials or informational articles on Blackboard should be sent to all persons serving as instructors sent out on a semester basis. The instructors could archive it in their email servers and access when it was needed, in a medium unconnected with Blackboard. Also, an all-staff paper memo may also be helpful for staff that prefers to receive information in hard copy form. By sending both forms of communication, staff members are more likely to remember the information, and call upon it when they have Blackboard questions.

2. **Educate:**
   Also, short seminars on campus prior to the semester start would be another helpful way to provide information to instructors. Many instructors already use Blackboard without issue, but may not realize the full potential of the tool. These seminars will provide information on the basic Blackboard functions, as well as instructions on the changes that may take place in the software from year to year. Instructors that attend these seminars will likely use similar formats and setups in Blackboard, increasing consistency for students in the online communication used in courses. Blackboard then can begin to be a useful tool for both students and instructors.

3. **Set Consistency:**
   The University should also implement simple guidelines for instructors integrating Blackboard into their classes. By gradually increasing the required amount of class information posted on Blackboard, instructors will progressively come to an understanding of Blackboard. Instructors need to place links on the Blackboard page to any course book learning suites and personal web pages. Also, emphasizing consistency with instructors’ file placement is an easy way to increase accessibility for students.

4. **Time Management:**
Blackboard CE 8.0, the version Michigan Tech is currently using, is capable of using certain books, as long as the professor knows how to attain them. This has been proved difficult. Unless more teachers display an interest in web-linked books, we recommend leaving them as an option for the more ambitious instructors. Any professor wanting to use books on Blackboard should start getting them before the start of the semester. This would ensure the ability to acquire the book.
List of Sources


17. Seigel, M. Bartley. Assistant Professor of Diverse Literatures & Creative Writing: Michigan Technological University. Email interview, 2/27/2010.