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Teaching Tips:

Using Blackboard™ to Enhance the Communication and Web Content in Your Course

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Tired of maintaining course websites on your own professional webpage? At many universities, faculty are using Blackboard (or similar packages) for the web component of their courses. If your university or college has a Blackboard-type package, you should consider trying it out for a semester. There are a number of great features that you could use to supplement your courses.

One of the key advantages of using Blackboard is that only you, your students, and your teaching assistants have access to the course website. This is an important feature, as it helps to ensure confidentiality in terms of posting student grades. When students log on to Blackboard, they can access the website for each of their courses that term and can view their grades, which are posted only for them. Thus, a Blackboard-type of system only permits each student access to his or her individual marks — faculty can avoid posting spreadsheets of grades (sorted by student number) on the walls outside their offices or on their websites.

Another advantage of Blackboard is that the limited access to the course website helps to ensure that posted course materials are only accessed for educational purposes. This makes it much easier to give students access to a host of class-related materials, such as pdfs of journal articles and various media clips (video and audio files). Instructors can also post their course outlines and lectures on-line, in a variety of formats. At my university, many faculty now prefer to post the slides of their lectures on Blackboard prior to the lecture, so that students can focus on adding notes to the slides rather than copying everything down. I have adopted this method and find that I can move through material much faster and that I get many more thoughtful comments and questions about the lecture material than when I used to post the slides after each lecture.

Academic web software, such as Blackboard, often also includes a number of ways to communicate with your students and for them to communicate with one another. For example, you can post announcements on the course website and opt to email those announcements to your students to ensure they read it. You can send individual emails to

students, as well as to select groups in the class. I regularly post and email announcements in my courses as a way of reminding students of an upcoming quiz or assignment, advising of a change to office hours, and notifying them about where to pick up marked assignments. I have found that this has significantly cut down on the number of emails students send regarding logistical aspects of the course.

Another communication feature of these software packages is the option to have a discussion board for the course. Such forums can be a great place to raise discussion topics prior to a class meeting, or can be used as a place to discuss class materials. These boards give students the opportunity to ask one another questions about the course, and the instructor and TAs can log on and also help guide the discussions. It is important, however, to establish some basic ground rules regarding discussion boards, to ensure that student posts are respectful and are not facilitating academic misconduct. As well, course discussion boards should be monitored frequently by either the instructor or TAs to ensure compliance with the course policies. With proper policies and monitoring, discussion boards can really enhance the student experience, particularly in large classes. Blackboard also provides the option to give quizzes on-line, which can be a useful way of ensuring students are prepared for class. For example, one of my colleagues gives brief quizzes on the assigned article that is to be discussed in class that day. Students can complete the quiz in the twenty-four hours prior to class, thus helping to ensure they have read the article prior to attending the discussion.

Once your course is over, there is usually an option to archive the course web materials on a Blackboard-style system. This is especially handy, because then you do not have to recreate all of the materials for new semesters.

Overall, I have found that web software such as Blackboard has made it easier to provide course information and to enhance the learning experience. If you haven't yet checked out a software package such as Blackboard, think about doing so for your courses next year.

Find additional teaching tips, syllabi, and textbook information at the Division 20 website: <http://apadiv20.php.ufl.edu/>