Online Course Development Guidelines

Department of Social Sciences

Kennebec Valley Community College

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Purpose

Welcome to the resource for guidelines for the development of online courses in the Department of Social Sciences at Kennebec Valley Community College.

The purpose of these guidelines is to allow for some degree of consistent graphic and user experience to both the student and faculty when encountering or developing an online course in this department. It is not intended to stifle the creative energies of faculty or students and faculty are allowed a great deal of leeway in terms of the application of these designs.

In addition to the consistent experience of the users, these guidelines meet or exceed the guidelines for online development for the college as a whole and put into practice the scholarship of effective online course design.

The guidelines are amenable to change so please feel free to contact me if you feel that a change, subtraction, or addition to these guidelines would be beneficial.

Enjoy!

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Basic Design Principles

The basic design principles that are outlined in this guide are mostly focused on layout, color and icon selection, and the inclusion of essential elements. Online pedagogy is an integral aspect of design but is not the focus of this particular document.

This document will cover the required elements and layout of all online courses taught within the Department of Social Sciences.

Our course management system is called Blackboard and certain tools and elements of the Blackboard interface will be considered essential while others will be considered optional.

- The layout of all courses in this department must be clean and easy to understand and navigate
- Choices in colors should emphasize high contrast background/text elements that incorporate the principles of Universal Design to the highest degree possible.
- All courses will incorporate a list of standard student tools
- All courses will incorporate a list of standard elements on the main page of the course
- All courses will include a list of standard documents (syllabus, class policies, calendar, etc.)
- All courses will be highly interactive through the utilization of discussion boards and other means of collaborative communication
- All courses will provide for and incorporate the tracking of students participation in class so that students struggling with the technical, intellectual, or emotional aspects of online learning can be identified early
- All courses will incorporate an orientation of sorts to the use of Blackboard in general, and the specific uses that are germane to the individual course

Keep in mind that the technology should not inform the pedagogy, but that the pedagogy should inform the technology. Focus first on what you are trying to accomplish, what learning objectives you are trying to establish...then consider which technology is best suited for the task.

Universal Design

Universal Design, as applied to online course development can be approached by these 10 simple steps:

1. Develop content first, then design
2. Provide simple, consistent navigation
3. Include an accommodation statement
4. Choose Course Management System tools carefully
5. Model and teach good discussion board etiquette
6. Use color with care
7. Provide accessible document formats
8. Choose fonts carefully
9. Convert presentations (PowerPoint) to accessible HTML
10. "If it is auditory make it visual; if it is visual make it auditory"

(http://ualr.edu/pace/tenstepsud/ 1/6/09)

Main Page Layout

As you begin to develop your online course you will be provided with a template within the Blackboard environment. Certain elements of the template will be included automatically while others, if you choose to use them, will have to be added.

Keep in mind the first rule of Universal Design...develop your content first, develop your learning objectives, units, assessments, etc...THEN move on to design. Once you have done that...here is how you are going to organize it!

| Start Here! | Course Syllabus | Course Calendar | Course Content |

Each course is going to start off with these four icons on the main page. These are folders into which specific kinds of information can be inserted in order to provide this information to your students in a consistent and efficient manner. For each icon/folder I will outline content (required and potential).

Be sure that ALL documents are labeled clearly and consistently using an identifiable convention:

For example: Assignment-01, Assignment-02, Outline-Week-01, Outline-Week-02, etc.

In the next section we will discuss file types so that all of your students will be able to view your documents.

MHK Hint:
If you are savvy with web development, you can create self-standing web pages for each of these folders such that when the students click on the icon they go right to the material instead of to a list of documents.

Start Here!

It is critical for new learners to have a place to "start" their exploration of your class. The following elements should be included in the Start Here portion of your class:

- An introduction to the class
- An introduction to you as an instructor and any biographical or professional information you want to include
- Class Policies and Course Expectations
    - Communication expectations including email, telephone, and appointments
    - Time frame for responding to telephone calls and emails

- Policies on handing in work (electronic or otherwise)
- In-class behavioral expectations (no food, cell phones, etc.) if applicable
- Online class behavioral expectations (use of technology, email, netiquette, etc.)
- Privacy and Respect policies
- An introduction of some sorts to Blackboard and the use of technology in the classroom (this may consist of links to the standard KVCC resources, but cannot simply be a "contact IT" type reference...if you are going to use technology to teach a class, you are responsible for ensuring that your students have the opportunity to learn it...this is why we dedicate the first week of class to orienting our students to our classes)

Course Syllabus

Of course this would include a printable copy of the official course syllabus, but this section may also include detailed descriptions of projects, policies specific to assignments, attendance policies and procedures, and detailed explanations of grading.

Officially we will be holding all students and faculty to the content of this section so if you have policies that you want adhered to that are enforceable and defendable...place them in this section.

Course Calendar

In this section you will place a document that outlines the course over time. One of the essential elements of online learning is the ability for students to "peek ahead" at what is coming up. It is desirable to have the ENTIRE class laid out on the first day of class so that students can see what they are getting into.

Online classes should be organized on a week-to-week basis (Week 1, Week 2, etc.) with corresponding dates. Due to the nature of online learning it is going to be important to delineate specifically when a "week" starts and when it stops. The class is going to be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days per week so you must define when the week ends and begins with dates and times.

For example: "Weeks will begin Monday morning at 8am and continue until Sunday night at midnight"

When you set due dates (and times) for your online assessments and assignments you will have to set a "time" as well.

- Include ALL due dates for graded material in your calendar
- Include important dates such as holidays, vacations, alterations in the regular class schedule, etc.
- Include references to other parts of the Blackboard content. If there is a quiz that is due be sure to tell students where they can find the quiz (in the Assessments section)

If you wish to use the built in calendar that comes with Blackboard you can replace this icon with a link to the Calendar. Be sure to get some orientation as to how to utilize the online calendar. Either way...students must be able to get a "birds eye view" of the entire class by visiting this part of the site.

Course Content

This section can be used in a number of ways to organize class material. If you have divided your class into learning units you can manage those units here (Blackboard has some nifty ways of organizing material like this).

You can also place notes, presentations (PowerPoints), articles, links, and other resources.

Be sure to organize the content of this section in line with the structure of your class and/or the Calendar.

Course Tools

Course Tools are the key technologies that are a part of the Blackboard interface. The standard course template includes a set that are required. You can examine other course tools at your leisure if you feel they may enhance your class or may be better suited to meet the learning outcomes you have.

Here is what the students' Course Tools section looks like:
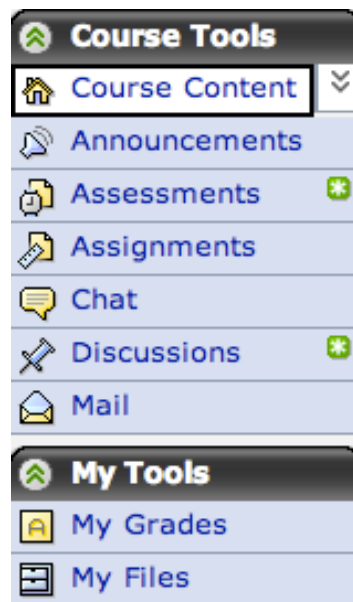
Announcements

In this section you can post general announcements to the class about class events, policies, due dates, etc.

MHK Hint:
Rather than use the Announcements button, I send an email to the whole class when I make an announcement. Some incorporate an "Announcements" discussion board in order to encourage dialogue on the announcements if appropriate.

Assessments

This section is where you post tests and quizzes.

Many text books come with pre-formatted test questions that can be uploaded to your course utilizing a KVCC licensed software called Respondus (Windows only)

Assignments

This section allows you to create digital drop boxes where student can submit files of their work. Here is where the issue of "file types" (next section) usually comes into play.

Be sure to educate your students that large files may be rejected by Blackboard so they may have to find alternative ways to get assignments to you.

Chat

Blackboard support synchronous chats (people online at the same time all logged into a secure chat room)

All chats are automatically recorded by Blackboard

Students can meet independently with one another in the chat room, but they should understand that the chat is recorded and can be viewed by the instructor at any time.

Discussions

Often the heart of an online class, Discussions allow instructors to post text-driven, interactive, asynchronous (we don't have to be online at the same time) discussions. Students log in and read other students' postings and post their own comments and responses.

Discussions can be directive where students have to perform a specific task, or they can be more free form where the dialogue can move in any direction. These act as a replacement for the live classroom discussion.

It is recommended that discussions be interactive and NOT focus on simply answering a specific question or set of questions. Having students report the same information again and again makes for a boring discussion and a poor learning experience. Discussions can be more qualitative in that they capture thought process, opinion, etc. of your students.

Discussion boards can also be used for other purposes.

MHK Hint
I include four specific discussion boards in all my classes. "Course Questions", "Technical Questions", "Project Questions", and "Student Lounge".

The first three are obvious and allow me to field commonly asked questions in a more efficient manner. The last, Student Lounge" provides a place for students to meet and discuss "non-course-related" material. Sometimes when a discussion gets off track in

My Grades

Blackboard has a powerful and very convenient system to record student grades of online quizzes, assignments, and even participation in discussions.

Faculty are able to imbed calculations into the gradebook to compute averages and even final grades if they wish

MHK Hint:
I utilize the gradebook extensively to provide immediate feedback to student work. All graded material is recorded in the online gradebook as well as calculations for averages, percentages, mid-term and final grades...even letter grades. My students know the details of their final grades well before the registrar does.

My Files

This section allows students to upload important files that they do not want to lose or files they wish to work on in another location. This is an interesting function with some interesting potential.

File Types

When you are posting documents to the web it is important to consider a couple factors about your audience:

• Connection Speed (modem, cable, DSL, etc.)
• Computer Operating System (Windows XP, Windows VISTA, Mac OS, Linux, etc.)
• Applications (word processing, browsers, plug-ins, etc.)

Connection Speed

When you are developing on your home computer your computer can usually access your files very quickly. When your students access these files they are usually downloading them from a remote server to their own computer. This involves a complex network of computers we call the "Internet" which utilizes protocols to send information from one computer (the Blackboard server at KVCC) to the students home computer.

Some of your students will have very fast connections through DSL, Cable, or maybe even faster if they are on an office network with T1 or other access. Getting files is not a problem for these folks.

However, sometimes the internet is "slow"...even with cable and DSL, so it is important that you keep in mind the file size of the documents you place on Blackboard.

Text is usually not a problem, but pictures, sounds, and in particular, animations and movies can be very large. Be sure to check the file size of the documents you are considering before you submit them to your course.

A common problem is when you import images and graphics into a word processing program. On your computer it opens right up, but it may take a very long time to download. Sometimes you can "right click" images in a document and ask the computer to "compress" all the images in the document to make them small but still look good. You still want to check the file size before you send it.

If you have a lot of media to send to your students consider having the IT department put together a CD which they can then sell through our Campus Bookstore. The same applies to large documents that you may want your students to have...the Bookstore offers a service where they will make "course packs" for your students. This saves a lot on printing time, download time, and overall frustration!

Computer Operating Systems

Although it is a reality that most computers are operating some form of Windows, it is not the only operating system on the planet. The document you are reading right now was written on a Macintosh computer.

Modern operating systems are pretty much the same (setting aside the age-old arguments for the moment!). They function to organize files, display them on a screen, and allow you to manipulate them. They also provide a platform to run applications (programs) that allow you to do these things.

For the most part you don't have to worry much about Operating Systems because for the most part they all play well together and understand each others files. However, sometimes they don't.

It is advisable that you not assume that your students have the same kind (or quality) of computer that you have so you want to reduce the course needs to the minimal requirements possible. Basic emailing, attachments, word processing, taking quizzes online, internet searches, and participation in discussion boards are all basic functions that nearly any operating system.

However, some of you might want to use specific software (Excel, SPSS, etc.) or may demand specific tasks (make a movie, presentation, web site). You will have to familiarize yourself with what is available on different platforms so that students can accomplish these goals on the systems they do have (see below for more information on applications in regard to file types).

Applications

Your students will need to have access to specific applications (programs) that run on their computer in order to access your material. I will list some of them below and discuss their importance in terms of file types (if they are going to open your documents or send you documents)

Browsers
- Browsers allow students to look at web pages and to navigate the Blackboard interface
- When you log on Blackboard it does a browser check to be sure that you have a modern enough browser with the correct version of JavaScript built in. Blackboard will provide you with feedback about this when you log in
- Blackboard will also check to make sure that you are able to view "pop up" windows. Many people turn off this functionality to avoid advertising on the internet, but they will need to turn it on to use Blackboard

Plug-ins
- To add functionality to a browser you often have to add Plug-ins
- Some of the most common Plug-ins that you can get for your browsers include Flash, Shockwave, QuickTime, Windows Media, and Adobe Acrobat
- If you are planning on posting content in these formats be sure to provide your students with links to the appropriate software (these are all free downloads)

Word Processing
- There are many, many word processing programs out there. These programs allow individuals to type documents, and often, insert charts, tables, and pictures.
- **Microsoft Word**
  - Microsoft Word is the predominant word processor in the world.
  - Office 2007 (the newest suite of applications that includes Microsoft Word) has a compression file format for Word documents that has a file extension .docx
  - Older versions of Office (and Word) had a .doc file extension
  - To read .docx files you either have to have the new version of Word or you have to download a converter from Microsoft to allow older versions of Word to read the files.
  - Users of the new Word (.docx) can also save their documents as regular .doc files to make it easier for more folks to see their files.
- **Other Word Processing Applications**
  - Some of the other word processors out there include the following:
    - Microsoft Works
    - Word Perfect
    - Pages (Mac only)
    - Apple Works
  - Many of these applications are fine for writing papers but will have to be converted to other standard formats so that everyone can read them.
  - It is recommended that they convert their files to "Rich Text Format" (it will have the file extension .rtf)
  - If you POST Rich Text Format files you can be assured that ALL word processors will be able to read the documents

Presentation Software
- Presentation software allows a student to create a slideshow consisting of text, charts, images, etc.
- Microsoft PowerPoint is the predominant presentation software (the Apple iWork application suite has an application called Keynote that does the same thing)
- Presentations can be posted in a course, but I'm not sure why one would want to do that...presentations are designed to emphasize specific key points and assume that they will be accompanied by a verbal presentation or handouts. Standing alone they are nothing more than a pretty fancy outline...better to just create a fancy outline in a word processor than to post your PowerPoint slideshow
- PowerPoint (and Keynote) presentations can often be saved as movies and web pages, often with accompanying audio! Check your documentation that came with the application and be sure to keep file size in mind.

Course-Specific Software
- Sometimes you may want your students to have specific software to use in the class.
- An example of this might be a statistics class that requires students to have SPSS (or, in a pinch, Excel)
- Be sure that you specify this early in the course so that students will have an opportunity to get the software.
- If you include the software as a requirement for your class it is likely that students can use their financial aid to get it.