Moving Beyond Digital "Chalk and Talk:" Using Blackboard to Support Authentic Pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

Although posting academic course materials online may *technically* indicate the incorporation of technology in teaching, it rarely constitutes *authentic* pedagogy. That is, using technology that has value beyond the technology itself. What is often lost amidst the increased time required for courseware instruction is a meaningful and useful pedagogical framework for using it to support student learning.[1] Much information is available on what courseware *can* do. Among its many features, Blackboard offers content-sharing, assessment tools, a student tracking system, and virtual classrooms. Yet many instructors new to the Web are left with the question, "*How* can I use these features to support my specific course goals, rather than add to them?" This paper addresses the aforementioned question and speaks specifically to those instructors who currently teach in the traditional mode of face-to-face (F2F) in a non-networked classroom, yet also have their courses (automatically) programmed into Blackboard. I offer data snapshots of two courses for comparison: 1) An undergraduate general education course utilizing Blackboard in *adjunct mode*, where online interaction supports F2F classroom instruction; and 2) A graduate certificate-level course utilizing Blackboard in a *hybrid* mode, where F2F classroom instruction supplements online interaction. Participants will be led through the interactive process of (1) establishing course goals, (2) mining Blackboard features for resources, and (3) developing authentic teaching strategies. Supplemental materials are provided to participants of this session.

COURSE EXAMPLE #1: UNDERGRADUATE GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE

The Spring 2003 semester offered an undergraduate general education survey course to introduce prospective candidates to the teacher education programs at Montclair State University. At the beginning of the semester, 17 students (mostly sophomores) chose this particular section. The course was experimental in its design as the only "technology-intensive" section. Surprisingly, nearly half of the group of students selected this "technology-intensive" course section with neither prior experience with MSU technology or basic proficiency in Microsoft Office Suite (e.g., Word, PowerPoint, Excel). This initial information gathering (and the lack of a basic technology course in the undergraduate curricula) compelled me to rethink my original 'technology-intensive" design in favor of a more conservative one. The common technological denominator was that each student had a non-MSU email account and used it consistently and frequently. Thus, I relied on this existing strength and provided initial Blackboard instruction to get students logged on. Additionally, the course was automatically programmed in a traditional (non-computer lab) classroom to meet 1.25 hours twice a week for 16 weeks. Although I had

[1] Research suggests a significant difference in the amount of time required for courseware instruction (18-19 weekly hours) in comparison to traditional face-to-face (F2F) instruction (6.5-7.5 weekly hours) (Pallof & Pratt, 1999).

limited instructor access to a Mac computer lab, all of the students enrolled used PC format. Given these initial constraints, I designed the course based on content goals, rather than technology goals (see Appendix A, Column 1). Particularly challenging/abstract were the goals of understanding the role of the teacher in enacting democratic educational ideals of inquiry, discourse, equity, authenticity, leadership and service. Thus, I looked to the possibilities of Blackboard to support this challenge. It was also essential, given the subject area of the course, that my pedagogy be aligned with the democratic practices reflected in the course content. Thus, I approached the administrative features of Blackboard with this in mind (Specific examples and challenges related to downloading course documents will be discussed in the presentation).

Originally, I intended for the Blackboard discussion board feature (under "Communication") to support several course goals: To establish a discursive community where students could deeper their understanding of the issues raised by the assigned readings and further assert their understanding and learning. As a vehicle for democratic practice, this online community was not for the benefit of student proficiency in using a discussion board. Rather, its purpose was to facilitate an open flow of ideas (regardless of their popularity) through discussion. Additionally, I expected students to form a community of support particularly with technology troubleshooting. I particularly valued the asynchronous nature as supporting student-centered instruction and conducive to multiple perspectives. The uses that emerged were surprising. Students did not want to "discuss" the readings using Blackboard. Neither did they mine the readings for their research projects. They wanted F2F lectures on the material, rather than generating questions and conversations independently online (with the guide of a discussion prompt). Despite posting prompts to questions about the readings, there was major disparity in the level of student participation. Given the resistance to the Blackboard discussion board, I utilized several other features of Blackboard, one of which was an anonymous midterm evaluation survey (under "Assessment Manager") as a safety valve for students. This particular administrative feature facilitated the inquiry aspect of democratic pedagogy in helping me to continually analyze and reflection my own practice as a professor and the collective practice of the students in the course (see Appendix A).

Most of the students continued to use Blackboard during the semester for individual administrative functions, such as checking their grade status. For those students who did not perform as well as they hoped, the grade book management did not provide the qualitative evaluation they were in need of, to help them integrate their knowledge with their writing or media production skills. The immediate access to grades was a double-edged sword that students praised in contrast to their resistance to the discussion board. Future evaluation of student work might incorporate consistent student submission via Digital Drop Box with timely instructor feedback in digital format (i.e., tracking edits in Microsoft Word). Blackboard ultimately evolved into an individual safety net, allowing students to strategically miss a few class sessions without severely jeopardizing their grade. Although I was not used to quantifying grades for assignments, it was a matter of assigning numerical scores to (student-generated) rubrics.

In retrospect, revisions include the modeling of essential transactions within a lab setting for the first week of class, including a group chat as an "ice breaker" allowing students to exercise their online voices in the context of the class setting. There also emerged a need for a "private" student space within the course where they can choose to exclude the teacher (administrator). The group of students did not have sufficient time to make decisions about course options I

presented in our F2K settings. Having an online space to discuss issues for consensus building, outside the pressures of teacher evaluation would strengthen a sense of community among these students and bring authenticity to online discussions (see Appendix A for additional course revisions).

COURSE EXAMPLE #2: GRADUATE CERTIFICATION COURSE

The Spring 2003 semester also offered graduate certificate level course for licensed teachers who seek state licensure to be an educational media specialist within a school library or media center. The course was originally scheduled as an independent study of administration and supervision of media within education. However, I reconfigured it as an experimental "hybrid" course that relied extensively on Blackboard and monthly on-campus F2F meetings. The frequency of F2F meetings were determined by the eight graduate students enrolled, who were also K-12 teachers with 5-25 years of teaching experience. Since the course content pertained to the administration of media and technology, it was important to privilege the "tech-intensive" element. All but one of the eight students regularly used a non-MSU email account and displayed proficiency in the use of Microsoft Word and PowerPoint (See Appendix B for content goals specific to this course).

It was essential that the course experience reflect the pedagogical and philosophical foundations of the certificate program—the idea that a media specialist is a curriculum partner (composite of informational specialist, traditional librarian-cataloguer of books-, professional developer, leader, advocate). Similar to the undergrad course, I wanted to model democratic pedagogy in the course format, as a possibility for how these seasoned teachers and future media specialists might orchestrate their relationships with teachers they serve. Blackboard was also one example of courseware that these teachers could administer at their own school sites.

In this case, Blackboard addressed a felt professional need among these teachers who were hungry for discussion. In contrast to the undergrad course, these teachers freely expressed their insights (from the textbook readings), successes and failures (at their school site) via the discussion board. Their ability to comprehend and analyze the textbook readings and then translate them into an online conversation was exemplary. Live chat would have worked well for these teachers, as course data show that most of the students accessed the site regularly within the same time periods (in the afternoon and evenings). Given the high volume of discussion board activity, it was challenging for me, as the instructor, to keep up with the threads within a single forum (I contributed along with the students). On the technical side, the teachers had difficulty with the Digital Drop Box feature—conceptually understanding how their files were sent and received. The discussions also carried a tone of formality (apologizing for misspelled words or an accidental posting). The form and content of this discussion board illustrated students learning from one another, sharing ideas and formulating an authentic online community. In this course, Blackboard reached a level of transparency in terms of communication with each other about the course readings.

Contributing to the success of this course was the use of Blackboard for more than just course continuity, but the reliance upon it for connecting to each other. Course revisions suggested by Assessment Survey responses include increased number of F2F meetings (bi-weekly) and an

online communal space where teachers could freely post their own recommended external links to the Web.

MOVING BEYOND THE DIGITAL "CHALK AND TALK"

The blessing and curse of Blackboard is its function as a template or container for course content. On one hand, templates are conducive to the "plug-n-play" (reminiscent of "drill and skill") of delivering content for students to access similar to lecturing. It is biased towards a linear (two-way) transfer of information, rather than a transformative model. Additionally, one cannot ignore the economic expense of such courseware. As the industry integrates more functions within one portal, some collages and universities pay $400,000 or more a year, with private universities showing the highest proportion of courses using courseware (Olsen, 2001). From this perspective, courseware is not designed to enhance teaching and learning. Rather, it is designed to *manage data and provide access to that data*.

On the other hand, an online template can provide a centralized location within the decentralized medium of the World Wide Web. Blackboard courseware is a conventional structure that offers familiarity to novice instructors who experience unpredictability and ambiguity of the online environment. This presentation features the potential of Blackboard to democratize the classroom by student generation of online content. Rethinking our purposes for the traditional F2F classroom setting opens up opportunities for strengthening teaching and learning. Although Blackboard is constructed primarily for top-down management (instructor delivery to students), there are ways to utilize its resources for a more democratic (student-centered) pedagogy. Depending upon the approach of the instructor, students can take immense control and be accountable for their learning. Ideally, these course experiences (particularly those that illustrate authentic online and F2F experiences) should be more portable than current archiving methods allow. This course experience can provide the teachers in the second course example with real digital portfolio material to use in their future roles as media specialists. Similarly, college instructors should be able to include exemplary Blackboard experiences in a digital dossier.

When we think of Blackboard as *courseware*, we are limited to online class rosters, course assignments, quizzes, discussion and an online grade book. Yet, once students access content, what they do with it and how they communicate their learning is the essence of an authentic pedagogical approach. Furthermore, aligning content goals with teaching strategies and using courseware features in a subordinate role ensures authenticity in teaching and learning. These two course examples provide evidence that an authentic pedagogy (although always an ideal in-progress) is possible in an online courseware environment, such as Blackboard. However, it is incumbent for instructors to expand the definition of technological proficiency to the ability for students to collaborate and effectively communicate online as well as in the classroom. If we expand our understanding of it to mean a *discursive community* where students together generate a significant amount of course content, then it becomes much more than an online template to hang our courses on.

References

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