Sheffield Hallam University

Blackboard: Site Design
Recommendations

Student Responses

'Sections and links need to be labelled better e.g. 'lecture slides' instead of 'resources' as different tutors put stuff in different places and it can be confusing.'

'Blackboard sites for course are disorganised. Too many folders. Can be tedious scrolling through information to find what you want.'

The site design session and this accompanying handout were informed by research into student perceptions of e-Learning and Blackboard use at Sheffield Hallam.

Responses to SHU's annual Portal Evaluation survey were considered to identify the key issues our students encounter in relation to Blackboard site design, and how these may impact upon their online learning experience. The support and guidance delivered as a consequence of this communication aims to promote straightforward and effective site design within Blackboard.

The following 11 points have been identified as key areas to consider when setting up your Blackboard site.

1. NAMING
Give meaningful names to documents, folders and links. A host of documents each entitled 'lecture notes' makes it hard for students to find relevant information quickly.

2. DESCRIPTIONS
Do let students know why you've added content, but keep descriptors helpful and succinct. For example, don't assume that because you know what a particular resource is, how it relates to students' learning and how you expect students to engage with it, that they will necessarily share this understanding.

3. EMPTY AREAS AND UNUSED TOOLS
Empty and unused areas and tools (e.g. an empty discussion board) can lead to confusion and frustration when navigating a site. If you anticipate tool or areas being needed at a later date, make them unavailable and release once they've become relevant to your users or explain that content will appear at a specified date in the future.

4. SITE VISUALS
Although there's nothing wrong with your site's aesthetic reflecting your personality, it's important to remember that some colour schemes, fonts and garish graphics can not only cause accessibility issues, but may also look unprofessional.

5. SITE STRUCTURE
Students can sometimes find that information is either deeply buried in a folder structure, meaning that it's many clicks away, or is spread too widely across a Blackboard site in sparsely populated content areas, which in both instances makes navigation awkward.

6. USING ANNOUNCEMENTS AND WHAT'S NEW

Announcements and new content additions from each of a user's modules feed through to the What's New channel on shuspace. Try to post concise, informative announcements in a timely fashion prior to a forthcoming event, and if a notice is temporary, be sure to remove it once it's out of date.

7. PLACEMENT OF ASSESSMENT MATERIALS

Consider using a dedicated assessment content area rather than placing tasks in either the learning materials or module documents areas. Doing so gives students a clear indication of where they should submit or complete their work.

8. CONFLICTING INFORMATION

Maintain uniformity between announcements and content located elsewhere in the site, e.g. an assessment deadline date should be the same in both the module descriptor and any accompanying announcement.

9. UPDATING DOCUMENTS

Be sure to update important course documentation each year. An outdated module handbook, for example, may contain incorrect assessment information which will confuse your students. Removing dates from the names of your items will reduce confusion and increase reusability.

10. MISSING CONTENT

Directing students towards content that is either missing or currently unavailable can be damaging to their confidence in the quality of your site as a learning tool, so be careful about when and where you place information.

11. STAFF DETAILS

Students value information that informs them of how and on what basis staff can be contacted. An up-to-date Staff Details section sets expectations regarding when and the frequency with which you'll be able to respond to them should they need to contact you. Additionally you may wish to use the area to introduce yourself and your areas of interest or specialism in relation to the subject.

Please contact your Faculty e-learning advisors for additional support in this area, or alternatively visit the Bb Support tab on shuspace.
For information about institution-wide e-learning plans and staff development opportunities, visit the e-Learning at SHU blog, located at: http://elearningatshu.wordpress.com

> *'Up to date information and course deadline reminders are essential.'*

> *'Details of tutors who do not have a direct phone line are harder to reach and correspondence takes longer.'*