

Learning Bytes session 7th December 2010

10 tips on making your Blackboard module instantly better:

10 re-colouring buttons

Why?

- It makes your Blackboard site look more attractive to students and therefore more engaging.
- Customising the interface helps to differentiate modules from one another
- It makes it look like you have made an effort to make it more attractive rather than accepting defaults.
- It could tie in to module colour schemes or School themes to give identity.
- Exact colour choice is down to personal choice and subjective but avoid those combinations which may cause problems for those with colour blindness or dyslexia.

9 simple adaptive release

Why?

- A bit complicated to deal with briefly but adaptive release allows certain bits of content to just be displayed when necessary and fitting certain conditions.
- It can be used to display things for certain groups of students which keeps things uncluttered and unnecessary content hidden for the other students.
- Content can be date dependant so only appear on certain dates, and can be removed from display when no longer needed.
- Adaptive release can be used to appear when something has been marked reviewed, and then the next task appears – good for when you don't want the students thinking too far ahead.
- Can be dependent on a test result – giving different content for students who pass and those who don't make the pass grade.

8 adding course banner

Why?

This is fairly self-explanatory and the same points to be made as colour of buttons:

- It makes the Blackboard site more engaging and attractive to students.
- Makes you look like you have made an effort.
- Gives a module some character and identity.
- Makes students clear which module they are in and separates modules so they don't look all alike.
- Can be tied to School/Department/subject themes/colour schemes.
- The banner only appears in the Announcements area of Blackboard, no other pages.
- A recommended size for course banners is 800 pixels wide x 100 pixels high. (The resolution should be 72 dpi which is standard screen resolution).
- Speak to your technician or LTA if you need help creating or resizing an image.

7 allow students space to talk to each other

Why?

- Blackboard is not good at the social side of things, you can't create profiles and students can't message each other unless the tutor sets up some sort of space for this.
- Because of that, you will find that people will take discussion elsewhere like msn, Skype and Facebook, but this may not be enough as all students on a particular module won't necessarily be on Facebook in the same social groupings.
- To cater for this it is a good idea to create some social and reflective spaces for students. This could be in the form of a discussion board which is set up for the student to communicate with each other or a blog space where student can reflect on their learning experience and comment on each other's posts.
- It is a good idea to make it clear that the space is for student-student communication and not be assessed.
- Do not underestimate the value of peer support and motivation, and learning from how other people learn and subsequent discussion.

6 Obvious starting point/ changing course entry point

Why?

- It is a good idea to have an obvious starting point to direct students where to go first.
- Although it is hard to put yourself in the students' shoes, remember they don't know at first how your course is structured.

- Making your Blackboard module as 'user friendly' and clear as possible will help put students at their ease and avoid confusion and negative associations with using the technology.
- They encounter a number of Blackboard module sites, and everyone structures theirs differently, often it is not clear where to go first.
- A really clear place to start will make it much easier for students. This could be either a button, or it could be making the entry point whatever is important at that time.
- You also don't have to have announcements as your course entry point if it does not make sense for your module. Many tutors will want students to see this first, but you could create another page as the entry point like a course overview or activity list or whatever fits your course structure.

5 adding staff details and photos

Why?

- This is a really simple thing to do and has a big impact on student to staff communication.
- Adding staff details including how and when they can be contacted is vital for effective student-tutor communication.
- Please tell students both when they can contact you and how email/phone/ etc. If you hold office hours put the details down on the staff information page.
- A photo makes such a difference – it makes you seem more approachable and friendly by providing a visual reference for your students.
- For any tutor not dealing regularly with the students it gives a friendly face with whom to connect.
- All Blackboard modules should have clear staff information
- Once you have added your staff details to a particular module it is relatively easy to then copy these across to any other modules you have.

4 make your Blackboard site more visual by adding pictures and direct text

Why?

- One of the things that makes Blackboard quite unattractive is an abundance of just links and file attachments.
- One way to make this look a lot more attractive is by adding a few images, which is quite easy to do.
- This makes it much more attractive and engaging for students. Including images will help to differentiate between different sections of the module and can reinforce/emphasise the text content.
- Another tip is to put small bits of text directly onto Blackboard rather than putting as a file attachment to make it less click-heavy and more attractive.

3 A welcome from you

Why?

- Into the top 3 tips... One really easy thing to do to make your Blackboard module more attractive and friendly is to add a welcome message from you the tutor.
- This is easy to do but maximum impact, the students will feel that the site has more of a human touch, and feel welcomed into the environment.
- If you can add a photo or a video message it provides more human contact to engage the students.
- The first time the student encounters your Blackboard site you want it to be a positive and welcoming experience, first impressions last, and a sterile, person-less site will not be a nice place to visit or stay.
- A welcome message can be added as an announcement or on your entry page – whatever that may be.

2 Renaming buttons and removing buttons

Why?

- You **do not** have to stick with the default buttons that Blackboard provides.
- Use the language you use in your module and keep all terminology consistent, so you could use the word activity instead of documents or 'your tutors' instead of 'staff information'.
- Delete any unused buttons – like communication or tools if there is not a real need for them to be there and definitely remove any buttons that have no associated content. There is nothing worse than students clicking and there is nothing in there.
- Don't be scared to delete and rename things– it will make your module more logical, more engaging and attractive to students. (If you feel unsure about deleting buttons, you can just make them unavailable, so they are still there but hidden from view).
- As well as deleting buttons you can also create new ones.

1 Course menu to follow the structure

Why?

- The most important tip on making your Blackboard module better was seen to be making your course menu follow the logical and natural structure of your course
- You do not have to be restricted to the order that Blackboard default modules are in. Change it to reflect your course structure whether that be by topic, activity, weeks, etc.
- This will make it more engaging and logical to students who will see the organisation reflecting what they are doing in face-to-face classes or the activities online.

How to do each of these things will be added as screencasts onto the ipark website on this page <http://ipark.hud.ac.uk/content/screencast-guides>