

Communicating with Students

Blackboard includes many tools for communicating with and allowing collaboration between your students. This tutorial will include a brief overview of some of the asynchronous communication tools in Blackboard including: Announcements, Email, Discussion Board, Blog, Wiki, and Journal.

Understanding the pedagogical intent of each tool will allow you to select the most appropriate and effective one based on their intended purpose.

Announcements

Announcements are an ideal tool for when you want to communicate time-sensitive material to students, such as reminders about upcoming due dates or changes to the course schedule.

Your students can access the Announcements from the Course Menu. The Announcements link is included as a default menu item when the course is originally created.

Announcements are automatically posted in reverse chronological order so that the most recent posting appears at the top of the list.

When creating an announcement, you can select date restrictions to control when individual announcements are initially displayed and removed from student view. An email copy is also sent out to students.

In addition, announcements may include a course link. This is a shortcut to a location or tool within a course. This can be beneficial when you want to remind students to take a quiz or complete an assignment as they can jump right to the page with the content.

It should be noted that course links will only work from an announcement within a course, and not from the emailed copy.

Email

In contrast to the Announcements tool where the intention is for everyone in the course to view a common message, the Email tool can target individual students, students who have been assigned to groups, TAs, or everyone if need be.

You can contact individual students, from within Blackboard, to discuss a course-related issue of concern requiring privacy and discretion.

For example, when reviewing grades in the Grade Center, you may identify a student whose performance is subpar, and you can immediately send an email to that student expressing concern and possibly proposing an intervention. Students can contact you by responding through email as well.

When you send an email to a user in Blackboard, it will also send you a copy of the email. Blackboard does not have its own inbox and does not retain records of the email you send, so be sure to save those copies!

Discussion Board

A discussion board is an asynchronous communication tool that allows your students to collaborate with others in the course through posting or answering questions. Discussion Boards are sometimes referred to as a forum, message board, or bulletin board.

Discussion boards are typically used to promote a threaded conversation, which is an online discussion about a topic. Students respond to a discussion board forum topic by creating a thread, or replying to an existing thread. This back and forth dynamic encourages a continued discussion among your students.

This type of activity can promote active learning by encouraging students to engage in reflection, investigation, and application of core course concepts, as well as interaction with fellow students.

You can also create a 'Help' Forum, a place where your students can post questions or comments about the course. Both you and students can respond to these questions, encouraging a sense of community and mutual support.

You have considerable flexibility when creating discussion board forums by establishing settings and parameters.

You can create a 'Course' discussion board forum where all students can participate and contribute to the discussion, or a 'Group' discussion board where only members of a particular group can access it.

You also have the option to enable grading for each discussion board forum.

Discussion boards can only be viewed from within Blackboard and are not publically accessible.

Blog

A Blog is a personal online journal that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. In Blackboard, however, only enrolled users can view and author Blogs.

Student Blogs are an effective way to gain insight into your students' understanding of course concepts and provide a way to share the knowledge, current thoughts, reflections, and materials collected.

Blogs are organized as a series of posted entries in reverse chronological order, and can include text, images, links, multimedia, Mashups and attached files.

Fellow students can post comments (that is, a remark or response) to another student's blog post.

You can enable grading for a Blog, which would entail grading the original blog post of students, but not the comments made by fellow students. If grading is turned on, a column in the Grade Center will be created automatically.

You can allow students to participate in blogs in three ways: course blogs, individual blogs, and group blogs.

With Course Blogs – Only you can create a course Blog and you determine the topic to be addressed. All course members can add Blog entries and also add comments to Blog entries.

Individual Blogs – you can create a Blog for individual course members to use. Only the owner of the Blog is able to add blog entries. All other course members can view and add comments.

Group Blogs – If you enable the Blogs tool for a group, all group members can add Blog entries and make comments on Blog entries, building upon one another's work. Any course member can view Group Blogs, but can only add comments.

A Group Blog is different from a threaded discussion as each entry does not need to continue the discussion of the previous entry, but can be a standalone creation.

Wiki

Wikis are used to create a collaborative space within the course where all your students, or groups of students, can view, contribute, and edit content. In Blackboard, the Wiki tool allows your students to contribute and modify one or more pages of course related materials, providing a means of sharing and collaborating. Pages can be created and edited quickly, while tracking changes and additions, allowing for effective collaboration between multiple contributors. You can create one or more Wikis for all course members to contribute to and Wikis for specific groups to use to collaborate.

You can also assign a grade to students' contributions to a Course or Group Wiki. After a Wiki is set to be graded, a grade column is created automatically in the Grade Center. Individual student and group contributions then can be graded inside the Wiki tool, where all pages and edits can be referenced as the grade is determined. If grading is turned on, a column in the Grade Center will be created automatically.

Journal

A journal allows your students to post personal reflections on course topics and experiences. Only individual students can post entries. These are not shared with other students by default.

Posted journal entries are in reverse chronological order, and they remain private within a Blackboard course.

When you create a Journal, you have the option to allow your students to be able to edit or delete entries. If the journal is to be graded, a column is automatically created in the Grade Center.

This type of reflective activity provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their progress in the course, including changes in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs.

By sharing this information in a safe manner (as contents are only viewable by the student and faculty), students may be more willing to be honest in discussing how they have grown intellectually from the start of the semester. In journals, only you and TAs can make comments and grade entries.

This tutorial provided a brief overview of the communication tools available in Blackboard. For more information on communication tools, visit niu.edu/blackboard