

### UB Teaches and learns

by Errol Craig Sull, Department of English

## Blackboard on UBlearns Wows and Helps Students!

Having used and taught with Blackboard on UBlearns for many years, I know its value to the students. And in teaching composition courses, primarily to freshmen, through the English Department, I have ample evidence of its ability to markedly improve students' quality of writing. Certainly, the many tools and options on UBlearns: become excellent assets to traditional, classroom-based courses; become important "partners" to computer classrooms; and become crucial "can't-do-without" components of online courses.

But while I, and many other instructors, can wax positive about the virtues of UBlearns, what about the students? Is it, in fact, just as much a help to the students as it can be to the instructors? To give you a better look at aspects of UBlearns I've employed and how students have reacted to them, I offer a variety of student comments on selected UBlearns features.

One important note here regarding students "buying in" to UBlearns. When students take required courses, such as Writing Composition, they are hesitant

to add anything to their studies that appears to go beyond the basics they need to pass the course. We, as instructors, while knowing the value of UBlearns, also understand that the more students are "ordered" to use any type of study/learning tool the more resistance, in general, the instructor will meet. Thus, I add a combination of humor, intrigue, and/or surprise to each of my UBlearns items – while always showing students (not TELLING students) how each UBlearns tool can make the course an easier one for them to pursue. After many years of UBlearns as my "aide" I can tell you: it works!

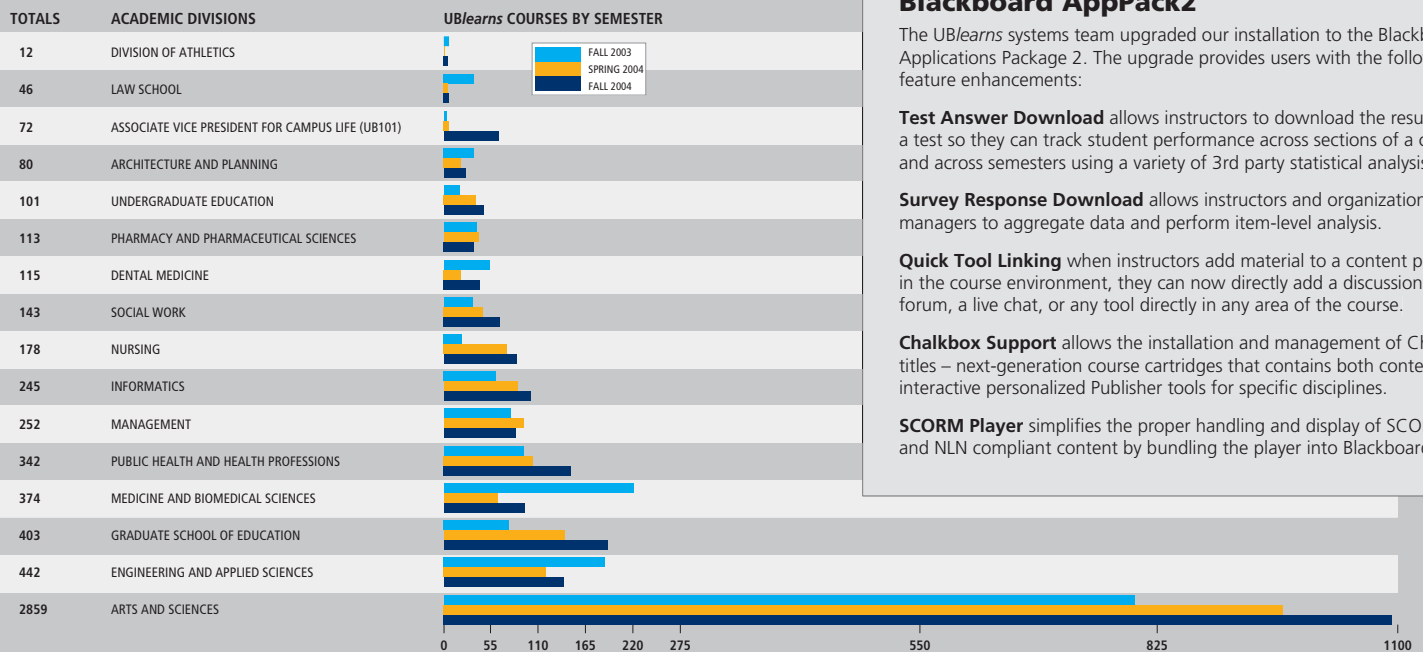
While I teach Composition, my approaches in using UBlearns can be adapted to virtually any discipline. I've had many colleagues in other departments ask me for suggestions for using UBlearns in their courses. What you'll find is that once you make a decision to really integrate UBlearns into your course, and I mean *really* integrate it, you'll find it rather easy to adapt for your subject area.

My approach to teaching is one that combines the information I teach and how students learn that information while improving their motivation and desire to learn the subject. An important component in successfully achieving this is to develop, as much as possible, an *esprit de corps* in each class. You'll find that I incorporate several of the UBlearns tools I've listed for this purpose.

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## UBlearns System Update

### UBlearns Usage by Academic Division



### UBlearns Upgrades to Blackboard AppPack2

The UBlearns systems team upgraded our installation to the Blackboard Applications Package 2. The upgrade provides users with the following feature enhancements:

**Test Answer Download** allows instructors to download the results of a test so they can track student performance across sections of a course and across semesters using a variety of 3rd party statistical analysis tools.

**Survey Response Download** allows instructors and organization managers to aggregate data and perform item-level analysis.

**Quick Tool Linking** when instructors add material to a content page in the course environment, they can now directly add a discussion board forum, a live chat, or any tool directly in any area of the course.

**Chalkbox Support** allows the installation and management of ChalkBox titles – next-generation course cartridges that contains both content and interactive personalized Publisher tools for specific disciplines.

**SCORM Player** simplifies the proper handling and display of SCORM 1.2 and NLN compliant content by bundling the player into Blackboard.

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### The next section shows my use of various Blackboard on UBlearns features and student comments:

#### Course Information

Posting my class syllabus here allows me to change, as necessary, any aspect of the syllabus based on new developments in the course. Indeed, at the end of my syllabus I offer the following: "While The Ten Commandments were set in stone, this course is not; based on student progress or other factors any portion of this course is open to change." Thus, I am able to offer my students what I call a reality-based syllabus: one they can depend on as always being accurate.

*"Too many professors give us syllabi that aren't adhered to for whatever reason. Knowing that I can check on our syllabus in UBlearns to find changes in reading or writing assignments keeps me from being surprised. UBlearns has at least kept me up-to-date on last minute changes in Professor Sull's syllabus." — Amy Curcio (student)*

#### Assignments

In addition to listing all major writing assignments, this section of UBlearns is also used for other items, including one I call "Pebbles." Developed five years ago, it is now used in more than 200 U.S. colleges and universities because of its natural affinity to course management systems and its proven ability to improve students' writing. I use Pebbles as a ten minute warm-up for each of my computer classroom meetings, and as a three-times-per-week assignment for my online and traditional classes. Here, students will find a test on some aspect of writing, then they will compare this with suggested answers. What they cannot finish in ten minutes (in the computer classroom) they save and complete during any down time in class.

*"Pebbles really refined my writing over the course of the semester, and it became a natural habit to sit down in class and immediately find Pebbles. Having all Pebbles for the full semester listed in UBlearns also made it easy for me to go back and complete what I couldn't finish in a previous class." — Dan Gersitz (student)*

#### Course Documents

These vary and can range from mini-lessons (I call them "Mini Pebbles") on various aspects of composition to articles I've come across that I think students would find helpful. I also use it to post each email I send my classes throughout the semester. This way students cannot use an excuse of being absent, or forgetting about checking their email, or their computer being down one or two days: all emails are available 24/7. As I use email correspondence extensively with my students access to the email is very important for them.

*"For several reasons there were times when I could not access Professor Sull's email on the day he sent it. Knowing that it was always available through UBlearns made sure I was always up-to-date on the information and reminders he sent, and also didn't miss any of the cool riddles or corny jokes he sent!" — Harrison Moar (student)*

#### Discussion Board

This is easily my most used UBlearns tool, and one that tremendously helped in class bonding while markedly improving the students' writing. Every two weeks I post a controversial subject, asking students for their response to my comments and/or to other students' comments. No anonymous postings are allowed and each student must respond at least twice in the two-week period (typically each student would respond four-five times). Conversation on the discussion boards often spills into the class.

*"This was much fun and at times it got quite heated. It was always interesting to see what students had to say and how others would react to the comments. I would also have to say that it made me more careful about the way I wrote because I knew the whole class would be reading what I wrote." — Eli Rheiman (student)*

#### Collaboration

This is a requirement for my online course, and offer it as an option for my traditional and computer classroom students. I pick two times during the week, once on a weekend and once on a weekday evening, when I will be available for online office hours. Each session offers a mini online lecture by me on a particular subject (such as comma splices, using citations, etc.). I email this subject to the class the day before the collaboration meeting. As students join in the discussions, other questions and comments come up as well. This is yet another use of UBlearns to enhance students' writing skills.

*"Taking an online course offered me more freedom than if I had taken a traditional class, but I also missed some of the one-on-one interaction with the instructor. Visiting Professor Sull during his online office hours gave me much-needed information on certain areas of writing in which I was weak. It also gave me an opportunity to ask other students in class about approaches they were taking for various major writing assignments." — Alex Espinal (student)*

#### Course Calendar

At first, this seems like a duplicate of the syllabus, but I use it to incorporate each day of the week for the entire semester. In addition to listing major paper due dates, official school holidays and the like, I also add writing tips, quotations, and fun facts. Also, I have students send me their birthdays and other pertinent items. Together, this class course calendar becomes, in essence, a community bulletin board, resulting in a better sense of class unity.

*"The course calendar became something I wanted to check. I had Professor Sull's emails and the syllabus to keep up on what was going on in class, but the little items he added in the course calendar made me, well, think a bit more about writing. And it was also fun to read what the other students wrote for the calendar!" — Kimberly Rickards (students)*

#### Staff Information

I've done some unusual stuff in my professional career – such as being a speech writer for President Jimmy Carter (while he was governor) and an assistant editor for *The National Enquirer*. Add these to the rest of my C.V., which I post in UBlearns, and students not only know why I'm qualified to teach this course but they also see glimpses of me outside the classroom. This leads to conversations throughout the semester, helping to foster more togetherness in the class.

*"I figured Professor Sull was qualified to teach me how to write because the school hired him to do that; I don't think they would have if he didn't have a good resume. But it was pretty cool to learn about other things he did in his life, and a few of them made me think he might have some advice to give me in one of the majors I was considering." — Megan Swartz (student)*

These seven are a partial list of ways that I have adopted and adapted UBlearns for my own purposes. Certainly, each instructor has his or her own style and philosophy of teaching, course structure, and evaluation mechanisms that will inform how UBlearns can best assist in the class. But no matter how different yours might be from mine I do know that UBlearns can be a welcome and very helpful classroom teaching assistant. It has greatly expanded and enhanced the reach of my teaching efforts, and it will do the same for you: just ask the students!

## Perspectives

by *Judith Adams-Volpe, Director, University & External Relations, Arts & Sciences Libraries*

### Developing “Information Access Regions” to Enhance Courses and Learning

University Libraries subject specialist librarians can collaborate with faculty to create “information access regions” for UBlearns course sites. If you have research assignments in your course, librarians can work with you to develop tailored information access regions for each assignment. Targeted information regions can provide students with embedded links to full-text encyclopedias, journal article databases, world-wide newspapers, statistics, technical manuals, image databases, online books, and even specialized materials suitable for intensive research investigations. Such specialized materials could include digital collections developed here at UB or available via the Web. Students can access these “regions” without leaving your course site. This immediacy facilitates high-level learning by clearly identifying major information resources as integral components of the intellectual content of the course.

Subject specialist librarians have been developing online guides to assist students and faculty with research in all disciplines and for specific courses for many years. Embedding active information/resource guides within UBlearns course sites takes this instructional technique further as a learning tool promoting information literacy. Faculty and librarians together can construct information access regions that target key resources for each assignment and also enhance student understanding and investigation of concepts, controversies, and current activities central to course content.

#### View Sample Information Access Region

Information access regions can be embedded within UBlearns course sites. To view a sample go to <http://ublearns.buffalo.edu> > login > select Courses tab > search for “Information Access Region”

To illustrate the basic format and the type of resources that could be transformed into an information access region for a UBlearns course site, we can look at two examples of Library research guides:

#### World Civilizations

Christopher Hollister, World Civilizations Subject Liaison  
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu> > Resources by Subject > World Civilizations

This research guide highlights the most important and useful electronic resources for the UGC111/112: World Civilizations. Links include: “Top Picks” such as *Greenwood Daily Life*, which provides information regarding the daily lives of people from cultures of the past, and JSTOR, a full-text journal article database which covers full runs of 450 academic journals. Links are also provided to full text journal and e-book databases, and primary sources such as *AccuNet/AP Multimedia Archive*, *Archives USA*, *Euro-Docs: Primary Historical Documents from Western Europe*, and the Web-based *World Civilizations Student Resource Center*.

#### Technical Communications for Engineers

Nancy Schiller, Engineering Subject Specialist  
[http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/asllguides/engineering/tech\\_proposal.html](http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/asllguides/engineering/tech_proposal.html)

Students in EAS 480/580 must develop a full-scale, real-world engineering project including all of its aspects—technical, construction, cost/benefit and needs analysis, etc. They need a wide range of resources from technical standards and data to business/management information. This course-specific guide provides links to major full-text databases for engineering technical information such as *ENGnetBASE*, *Knovel E-Books*, and *Ullmann’s Encyclopedia of Industrial Chemistry*. Resources for statistical information and major journal article databases are also provided as well as links to Web sites for identifying professional experts in specific fields.

To view additional online **subject guides** developed by the Libraries, visit:

**Resources by Subject:** <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/e-resources/subject.html>  
**Subject Guides:** <http://libweb.lib.buffalo.edu/guide/guides.asp>

To identify the subject **specialist librarian** for your discipline, or who would be most appropriate to assist you with information resources for a course or specific assignments, see the list of specialists at:

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/staff/specsubj.html>

...end

## UBlearns FAQ’s

by *Mark Woodard and Sue Michel-Giolando*

**Q I notice the Guest Access button is no longer available. Does this mean guest access to UBlearns has been disabled?**

**A** Guest Access for Blackboard on UBlearns continues to be available, but access has changed slightly due to the latest application upgrade. The new procedure for guest access:

- Click the Course Catalog button located under the Login button
- Browse the Course Catalog or search for a specific course by entering a course title or course ID in the search box
- If the course is set for Guest Access, a Preview button will be visible to the right on the course listing
- Select the Preview button for access to course content

**Q I would like to re-order My Courses view so that the current semester sites are listed first. Can you help?**

**A** Users cannot re-order course listing in the Courses tab. However, users can modify the My Courses module located in the Updates tab to reflect current semester course sites.

- To add the My Course module to your updates tab, click the Contents button in the upper right section of the window.
- Click the check box next to My Courses > Click Submit > Click OK

- Select the Edit My Course Module button (it looks like a pencil)
- The Customize My Courses screen allows users to modify the default display of Courses, Course ID, Announcements, Tasks and Calendar Events

**Q I have seen a course site with an image on the front page. Is this something I can add to my site?**

**A** Yes, instructors can add a banner to the top of the Announcements area of any UBlearns course site.

- Create a banner in an image editing program such as Photoshop or Fireworks.
- Go to the control panel, select Settings, and then select Course Banner to add a banner to your site.

**Q What are Blackboard Course Cartridges?**

**A** A Course Cartridge is pre-packaged course material designed in most cases to complement a specific textbook or e-book. Content can include slides, documents, multimedia files, links to related Web sites, test banks and quizzes. Approximately 3000 cartridges from 32 publishers are now available. More information on Course Cartridges and a catalogue of cartridges currently available can be found at:

<http://cartridgecatalog.blackboard.com/catalog>

## Meet Your Support Staff

### Roberta (Robin) Sullivan

Educational Technology Center



Robin has been a UB professional staff member since 1998. As an Instructional Designer in the Educational Technology Center, her primary responsibility is to help faculty integrate technology into their teaching and research to achieve their instructional goals. Robin coordinates the ETC instruction program, providing individual and group instruction on a variety of topics including the effective use of Blackboard on UBlearns.

Robin holds a Master of Arts in the Humanities (MAH) interdisciplinary degree with a focus in education and communication design. She regularly provides presentations to members of the educational community about realism in multimedia, technology as a tool to enhance learning, and Web design usability. She also offers courses related to interface design as an adjunct faculty member in the School of Informatics. Her research interests focus on the quality of interactivity and how individuals interact within a learning environment. Her view is that interactivity creates an experience where the viewer participates, makes decisions, and takes on a leading role in the learning experience.

When Robin is not working she enjoys camping, reading, and being creative.

Contact Robin at: [rrs@buffalo.edu](mailto:rrs@buffalo.edu) or 716-645-7700 x3

## From the Editor

In this issue we've presented some ways faculty and librarians are using UBlearns to enhance student learning opportunities. Two essential strategies are highlighted:

- dynamic personalized use of communication tools, and
- targeted customized linking to highly relevant research resources by partnering with subject specialist librarians.

Both of these strategies emphasize student-centered course development and contribute to a more effective online teaching and learning environment.

The UBlearns Support Team and Advisory Group are working together to identify additional ways to optimize the UBlearns course management system toward faculty and student teaching and learning goals. This semester our focus will be on exploring Blackboard "building blocks" – add-on components that augment UBlearns functionality beyond the dissemination of course information.

Our "best bet" tip for faculty new to the UBlearns system: attend a UBlearns workshop! The workshops are hands-on training sessions and provide opportunities to discuss best practices with experienced instructors and colleagues. The ETC offers regularly scheduled UBlearns workshops at our north and south campus locations. See the ETC Web site for specific dates and times.

In addition, ETC instructional support staff offer individualized training and course development to all UB faculty and staff. Contact us at [etc@buffalo.edu](mailto:etc@buffalo.edu) to schedule a consultation on your instructional support needs.

— Carole Ann Fabian

## Workshops

To view schedule and register for upcoming UBlearns workshops,

GO TO > <http://etc.buffalo.edu> > Instruction > Workshops



### Educational Technology Center

University Libraries  
212 Capen Hall  
Buffalo, NY 14260-1680



#### UBlearns contacts:

For software and technical support, contact Systems support: [ublearns@buffalo.edu](mailto:ublearns@buffalo.edu) or 645-2803  
For course development and instruction, contact Faculty support: [etc@buffalo.edu](mailto:etc@buffalo.edu) or 645-7700

UBlearns Update is a newsletter for faculty and staff to share knowledge in the area of teaching and learning using UB's centrally supported course management environment. UBlearns Update Newsletter is a joint publication of UBlearns Advisory Group, the UBlearns Support Team, the Educational Technology Center, and Instructional Technology Services. To submit articles for consideration, contact our editor Carole Ann Fabian, Director, Educational Technology Center at [cafabian@buffalo.edu](mailto:cafabian@buffalo.edu) or 645-7700 x2.