

UB Teaches and Learns

UBlearns Building Blocks "Sandbox Server" Coming Soon!

by *Lisa Stephens, Associate for Instructional Resources and Thom Slomka, Managing Director for DSC Projects*

A new development server will soon be available for faculty to test building blocks for UBlearns. This long awaited "sandbox" will provide both hardware and a process by which faculty can experiment with new tools made available by publishers and other third party developers.

Blackboard's website, (www.blackboard.com/extend/b2/) describes building blocks as serving a variety of purposes; they can:

- Customize discipline-specific or pedagogical needs
- Aid system administration
- Automate procedures or repetitive tasks
- Act as a bridge between Blackboard and external systems or applications.

In addition to the Blackboard site, publishers frequently make building blocks (a.k.a. "plug-ins") available that are course, discipline or service specific. A current example is the Turning Point™ building block that allows students to register their "clicker" to UBlearns to record data for attendance, quizzes, etc.

The UBlearns server environment is a complex cluster of several machines interacting to provide core production services. The support and advisory teams were challenged to create a policy that provides faculty with the freedom to propose and adopt new teaching tools without risking campus-wide service reliability. The resulting "sandbox" server policy creates a path that allows building blocks to be tested prior to potential production implementation. The complete project proposal background and process

is detailed at: www.ubetc.org/ublearnsadvisory

Once a building block is identified for possible use, an online proposal form is submitted to provide details to the advisory and support teams. Each request is considered a custom application, with the complexity of the software directly impacting time-to-adoption. The faculty advisory team reviews the proposal to ensure pedagogical value, then works with the support team for installation on the "sandbox server" for a limited test run (less than three weeks). If the course instructor(s) determine the tool is worthy of implementation, it could then be moved to a test server to check for any interoperability issues, then potentially to the full UBlearns production environment.

Should a building block cause any interoperability issues during subsequent production system upgrades, the technical team will make every effort to resolve the problem prior to "bumping" it back to the test server for further investigation. To insure reliable campus wide UBlearns operation, core production services will always take priority over building block applications.

One of the greatest challenges of introducing a new service is estimating the amount of effort required to ensure success. The advisory and support teams have no way of predicting how popular this service may be, so operational policies governing the introduction will be revisited on a regular basis and adjusted as necessary and feasible. The UBlearns support teams are anxious to receive feedback regarding the sandbox server (or any other issues), and can always be reached through ublearns@buffalo.edu. ■

UBlearns System Update

Blackboard on UBlearns Upgrade

by *Mary Soom, Senior Assistant Librarian and Susan Michel-Giolando, Assistant Administrator for UBlearns*

Administrators of Blackboard on UBlearns have upgraded the Blackboard application to version 7.2. The upgrade includes a number of application enhancements and new features outlined below. Detailed information can be found in the Blackboard Instructor Manual.

New Features:

1. Early Warning System

The Early Warning System can be used to send warnings to students when an academic performance problem appears. Warnings can be generated on graded items, late or missing course work, or attendance within the course. The Early Warning System will appear as a new link on the course control panel. The Early Warning System is closely associated with the Performance Dashboard.

2. Discussion Board

• Forum and Thread Grading

You can now grade participation in a Discussion Board forum. Instructors may choose to grade the forum or to enable thread grading within the forum. If thread grading is enabled for the

forum, instructors have the option to turn grading on or off for each new thread.

• Discussion Board Statistics

Discussion Board statistics are now a part of the Performance Dashboard. The total number of forums in which the user has participated is displayed. Statistics displayed include:

1. Total Posts
2. Date of Last Post
3. Average Post Length
4. Minimum and Maximum Post Lengths
5. Average Post Position

• Forum Moderation and User Management

Instructors have the option of enabling moderation. If enabled, the post is saved to the Moderation Queue when a user other than a Moderator or Manager submits a post.

If a moderator chooses not to share a post, a return message can be attached to the post letting the sender know why the post was not accepted by the moderator.

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How to get help

Software and technical support: ublearns@buffalo.edu or 645-2803

Course development and instruction: etc@buffalo.edu or 645-7700

Advisory or Building Block development server information: ubetc.org/ublearnsadvisory or 645-6522 ■

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- **Rate Posting**
Rate Posting allows users to rate posts in the forum on a scale of one to five stars. When enabled, Rate Posting is a simple yet effective tool for peer review.
- **Thread Subscriptions**
The *Subscribe to Thread* option allows users to subscribe to threads and notifies users each time a new post is added to the thread.

Enhancements:

1. Discussion Board Enhancements

- Instructors can copy Discussion Board forums to the same Discussion Board or to another Discussion Board in the course.
- Users can save posts as drafts until the post is ready for publishing.
- Instructors can decide whether or not to make a forum available on the Add/Modify Forum page.
- Adaptive Release and availability rules are now available for Discussion Boards.
- Users can group posts into Collections. Collections can be sorted and filtered.
- Instructors can now lock a forum to prevent additional posts.
- Discussion Board Grades are included, by

default, in gradebook calculations.

2. Announcements

- **Broadcast Email**
Instructors can now deliver information to students by generating an email when creating or modifying a course announcement. This email will be sent to all users enrolled in the course and will contain the title and body of the announcement.

3. Email

- A tool has been added that allows mail to be sent to all student users.
- HTML formatting is now available for email messages.

4. Visual Text Box Editor

- Visual Text Box Editor is now available to users running any supported browser.
- The Visual Text Box Editor is now available in more places within the application.
- WebEQ and MathML tools on the Visual Text Box Editor have been enhanced.

5. Assessments and Gradebook

- Assessments may now be set to allow unlimited or a specific number of attempts.

- Self Assessment is available in two forms: one allows the instructor and student to view the grade, the other allows only the student to view the grade. A grade is not included in the final score for the student.
- Test and Survey manager now allows for importing and exporting of assessments and surveys.
- When creating a test, questions may now be marked as Extra Credit.
- Instructors may select any combination of the score, submitted answers, correct answers and feedback to be displayed to students at the end of an assessment.
- Submission reports for assessments now include Name, Username, CourseID, Assessment name and date/time of submission.
- Gradebook items can contain comments that are viewable by students.

6. Additional Enhancements

- Two new Language Packs have been added: Traditional Chinese and Arabic.
- Spell Check is now present for email, Glossary and Assignment comments. ■

UB Teaches and Learns Spring '07 "Teaching with Technology" Survey a Success

by Lisa Stephens, Associate for Instructional Resources

As last semester drew to a close, 248 faculty members participated in a comprehensive "Teaching with Technology" survey sponsored by the Educational Technology Center, UBlearns Faculty Advisory Committee and Computing & Information Technology.

Responses were received from all decanal units and represented 72 departments. Over half the respondents considered themselves "expert" or "very comfortable" using technology to prepare and deliver course materials.

Faculty encourage student use of technology primarily through online resources and incorporation of images and/or multimedia as part of lectures or formal presentations. Nearly one quarter of the respondents offered at least one course through an "alternative delivery system" (an online, distributed learning or otherwise time-shifted course). More than 15% use or refer students to "Web 2.0" applications such as a blog, wiki or other social networking tool.

The results from this survey make strong headway in better understanding the barriers and incentives faculty experience incorporating technology in

their teaching. "Big rock issues" include easier access to technology classrooms with integrated tools and services that enhance active learning and student tutorial/review (e.g., "clickers" and course capture). Productive feedback was received regarding the development of collaborative learning spaces to support student team work, and consideration of features to augment UBlearns.

Qualitative comments clearly indicate that a departmental discipline strongly influences the type of tools used and features desired, particularly within UBlearns. Publishers that cater to specific disciplines sometimes supply services that become attractive alternatives to UBlearns, but are not locally supported. Some instructors choose to maintain a course web site that links to specific tools as a preference over UBlearns. Priority issues that need to be explored to make UBlearns a more productive tool are features that require fewer clicks to execute gradebook and other tasks, linking UBlearns gradebook to the online grade reporting tool, incorporation of a blog/wiki or other type of enhanced collaboration and e-portfolio tools, and better access to "just in time" training or video support modules.

This survey data dovetails nicely into the rollout of the new development server that allows both the UBlearns faculty advisory and support teams to investigate Blackboard™ building blocks. A "clicker" building block, for example, is being installed in UBlearns that gives instructors the option of registering student attendance and quiz responses directly into UBlearns.

The overall survey feedback was balanced and reflective – acknowledging both the progress made with broadly available instructional tools and services while identifying and assisting in the prioritization of new technologies that allow UB students and faculty to focus on effective teaching with learning. Continuous faculty feedback is critical in the assessment of new tools and practices. More than a dozen instructors volunteered to participate in future technology focus groups that will help determine how tools and services are adopted on campus.

If interested in participating in a future technology focus group, please send an email to Lisa Stephens, stephens@buffalo.edu. Student and faculty survey reports are available at: www.itsurvey.buffalo.edu/reports/ ■

Perspectives

Blackboard Plug-ins a.k.a. "Building Blocks"

by Ken Ehrenberg, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy

I usually figure that I have less use of Blackboard than most. As a philosophy professor I don't have the need for labs, language instruction, image display or manipulation, and scientific notation that others may utilize. Basically, all I need is to make readings and syllabi available to students, receive papers and tests, provide for student discussion or collaboration, and track grades. Even with these minimal requirements, I find myself bumping up against some limitations of this otherwise very useful tool. Now that *UBlearns* will have access to a "development server" (for trying out new developments), there is an opportunity to investigate plug-ins that can help remove some of the limitations found in the "bare-bones" version of Blackboard we have in *UBlearns*.

I have been teaching with *UBlearns* since 2001. It offers many possibilities for making teaching more efficient, rewarding, and enjoyable for faculty and students. That said, I have been frustrated by the complexity of uploading and presenting writing assignments and other content to students. After I decide what readings to assign in a course, I want the system to:

- Provide electronic versions of all of the readings linked directly from the syllabus
- Randomly assign students into groups of two
- Tell each student which of two different paper topics they are to write on.

The students are then to write about the assigned topic and use the system to exchange drafts with their partners, who edit and mark-up comments before returning them to their original authors for final revision and submitting to me.

Experience over time has revealed that in a class of more than 40 students, this assignment requires three pages of student instructions and a significant amount of work on my part to execute. I must:

- Upload and individually name assigned readings (as opposed to a batch upload)
- Create an html code syllabus in order to link the embedded reading assignments
- Manually partner the students into groups of two
- Draft detailed and complicated instructions for the students to follow in order to exchange their work and submit it to me.

Students find the current assignment process somewhat cumbersome as well. After writing their papers they need to:

- Upload an MSWord version to their group
- Download their partner's paper
- Turn on 'track changes' in MSWord
- Make corrections
- Upload the draft
- Download their own paper when their partner is finished
- Make subsequent corrections, and finally –
- Upload the paper to the "digital drop box."

Another issue arises when working in the digital drop box (a different section of *UBlearns*): a student can easily forget to make the content available to me! Once I download each paper, correct it, and upload it again to the dropbox, I then must record the grade in the separate gradebook section of *UBlearns*.

Ideally, the syllabus feature should automatically have templates for T/Th or M/W/F classes and internally embedded links to assigned readings. I should be able to modify the lessons on one page and not have to click each lesson individually in order to assign readings. I should be able to batch upload my readings and apply settings to all of them at once. The system should be able to randomly assign students to groups of any size. That

group should have collaboration options that allow them to use a word processing feature (complete with editing and comment functions) within the system rather than draft-upload-download-edit-upload-download-edit-upload. Those papers should be in a central repository that is divided up by groups and to which I can make direct comments to final drafts and record grades at the same time. Other features that would be nice are more control over the placement of content on the page that students see, and automatic notification features in the discussion board and elsewhere - so that a student is notified when there is a response to a posting that she has made or new content has been added. I've also experimented with lecture podcasting, and direct links to podcast content would be useful as well. Integration of *UBlearns* with the campus grading systems should be considered so that we don't have to enter grades twice - just send them over from *UBlearns*. Another welcome addition would be automatic email notifications sent to advisors when students are failing or are not completing assignments.

Before you conclude that I'm complaining about an otherwise valuable tool, consider that many (not all) of these issues can ALREADY be addressed by some of the Blackboard "Building Blocks" that are being made available. My cursory review of the available plug-ins turned up the following promising examples:

- "Class Top" allows for a 'drag-and-drop' interface for adding content (including nested folders)
- "Advanced Group Management" allows for randomized group assignment and more streamlined group communication.
- "ClearTXT" provides for automated announcements of changes.
- "Document Unpackager" allows for the uploading of zipped files.
- "Journal LX" allows for peer editing and commenting of papers.
- "Sign-up tool" allows for students to sign up for limited seating sessions or tutoring appointments.

There are also several options for embedded html editors and podcasting options that I intend to investigate. I hope that others will join me in researching these plug-in tools and taking advantage of the new development server proposal process saving our precious time and making our teaching even more effective in *UBlearns*. ■

UBlearns Faculty Advisory Committee

The *UBlearns* Faculty Advisory Committee provides guidance on issues, policies and technology that impact the *UBlearns* course management service. The committee represents a broad range of academic interests across the campus community.

Current Committee members are:

Jennifer Austin, John Blyth, Kathleen Boje, Kenneth Ehrenberg, Richard Feero, Peter Horvath, Denise Krause, David Murray, Judith Robinson, Kay Sackett, Barbara Sherman, Thomas Slomka, Lisa Stephens, Athena Tsembelis and Jennifer Zirnheld.

For more information, please visit the *UBlearns* advisory web site at: www.ubetc.org/ublearnsadvisory ■

Meet Your Support Staff

Lisa Stephens



Lisa Stephens joined the UBlearns support team while working with videoconferencing, course capture and webcasting as an emerging technology on campus.

Her professional path began with a BFA from RIT in

graphic design, working briefly in commercial advertising prior to becoming a production broadcast engineer at ABC-TV in Chicago. Following a return to New York for graduate work at Syracuse University, she shifted to an educational arena by teaching local community groups how to use multi-media tools in public access television, while teaching creative writing and media literacy classes at Niagara University. In 1996, she joined UB's School of Engineering

– supporting the Enginet™ distance learning consortium.

Along with several other UBlearns Team members, Lisa's role later expanded while working at Millard Fillmore College applying new media technologies to deliver curriculum to off-site students. Her research interests led to the completion of a PhD in 2003, examining administrative understanding and collaborative applications of distributed learning. She is currently engaged in strategic planning and serving as an educational technology liaison between faculty, staff, distributed and central IT groups. Lisa represents UB on the SUNY Faculty Access to Computing Technology (FACT) Council, and the Consortia of Colleges and University Media Centers board of directors (CCUMC).

Lisa enjoys an adjunct faculty position in the department of Communication, is president of the Literacy Volunteers of Niagara and is easily distracted with any conversation surrounding recreational sailing. ■

Workshops and Help

To view schedule and register for upcoming UBlearns workshops, go to etc.buffalo.edu/workshops.

Software and technical support:
ublearns@buffalo.edu or 645-2803

Course development and instruction:
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Advisory or Building Block development server information:
ubetc.org/ublearnsadvisory or 645-6522 ■



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