

Adopting & Implementing Blackboard at a Virginia Middle School

by Nancy Hoskins

Blackboard, a Web-based learning management system, allows teachers to post course materials, email students, conduct asynchronous and synchronous discussions. It also allows students to transfer documents between school and home as well submit assignments online. Although this tool can be used to teach a course entirely online, as is the case with Fairfax County Public Schools' (FCPS) online campus, FCPS 24-7 Learning, Blackboard is used primarily as a communication tool to extend learning beyond the traditional school day.

As with anything new, adoption of a new technology does not happen seamlessly. Unless change is mandated or dramatic benefit is demonstrated, most teachers are resistant. At Poe Middle School we are in year four of a slow but steady adoption of Blackboard. During the 2002-2003 school year, after providing Blackboard training to the Vanguard committee (a group of teachers who plan for and implement training for technology integration), the principal was asked to establish a minimum use requirement for Blackboard and have Vanguard team members provide the necessary staff training. Because of other school-wide initiatives, she preferred that Blackboard not be required, but that its use be spread in a grassroots fashion.

Challenged with implementing Blackboard at the grassroots level, we developed two Blackboard sites, Poe Staff Technology and International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IB-MYP), that focused on introducing the strengths of the application as a central location for sharing resources. An information management system (IMS) requires all teachers to use the IGPro gradebook and the ClassXP attendance program. Poe Middle School became an IMS school in September 2003. The Poe Staff Technology site became the vehicle for sharing IMS "Frequently Asked Questions" and quick reference sheets. Also during the 2003 school year, Poe MS was adopting the baccalaureate program. The IB-MYP site, developed by Pam Morgan, Poe's IB-MYP coordinator and a Vanguard Team member, served as a repository of MYP resources.

Simply creating and maintaining these sites did little to achieve the goal of introducing teachers to the resource-sharing benefits of Blackboard.

The VSTE Journal is published by the Virginia Society for Technology in Education. Permission is granted to copy and distribute single articles from this publication for non-profit use with copyright notice.

Contents copyright © 2004, VSTE.
All rights reserved.

Adopting Blackboard, continued

Teachers needed both initial training and ongoing encouragement. Early in the second semester, IMS issues, specifically issues with the IGPro second-quarter grade-exports, necessitated a meeting with the entire faculty. At grade level department meetings, teachers were shown how to access the IMS resources in Poe Staff Technology. Shortly thereafter, staff was introduced to the IB-MYP organization and its valuable resources, reinforcing the idea that Blackboard is a viable vehicle for sharing material with staff and/or students. Both sites were maintained with quality and timely materials; as staff members requested IMS or IB-MYP information, they were consistently referred to the Blackboard sites to access the material.

As the staff became aware of Blackboard through the Poe Staff Technology course and the IB-MYP Organization, a core group of teachers was trained to use Blackboard as instructors. Formal Blackboard training of new Vanguard team members took place early second quarter during two half-day sessions. Individual members began to plan how they would use Blackboard with their students. Debbie Anderson, eighth grade math teacher, math department chair, and Vanguard team member, decided that eighth grade math teachers would systematically use Blackboard to post homework. Catherine Hawkins, seventh grade math teacher and Vanguard team member, believing this to be a good idea, presented the idea to the seventh grade teachers. A letter was sent (see appendix A) to all Poe MS parents introducing the FCPS 24-7 Learning site, through which they can access Blackboard. Math teachers were trained and built their sites. All eighth grade students were taken to the lab to access the site, change their passwords, and learn how to access their homework assignments. A second letter was sent to parents sharing their student's ID and password, thus providing them with Blackboard access. One of the three eighth grade teams then decided that the entire team should be using Blackboard to post homework. Momentum for Blackboard was spreading through the eighth grade.

During the 2003-2004 school year, staff members had a professional obligation to attend a seven hour/195th day of training outside of school time. With the approval of June Monterio, our principal, application was made to our cluster director for permission to teach a 3.5 hour 195th¹ day Blackboard Basics session for interested staff members. At a subsequent faculty meeting the staff was introduced to two additional features of Blackboard, the discussion board and a survey creation tool. The teacher-generated discussion board question pertained to students turning in late-work and the impact this had on meeting final grade export deadlines. Teachers were encouraged to visit the site and contribute their thoughts on how to teach student accountability. The survey was to gather data regarding teachers' use and perceptions of various tools for communicating with parents, their knowledge and use of Blackboard, and their technology skills. How to access and complete the survey was demonstrated at the faculty meeting. As an incentive for completing the survey, teachers were prom-

1. 195th day is a name given to the training obligation because it was a day added to the teacher's contract length. The teacher contract is now 195 days.

Adopting Blackboard, continued

ised a reward². Staff members were informed of the 195th day training and encouraged to sign up for training through email. There was sufficient interest to conduct two sessions. Momentum was growing throughout the school.

Additional opportunities for training were afforded us through a mentor/protégé program and the Teachers As Researchers program, each of which provided funds for substitutes. When offered a half day of sub coverage to build their site, eight teachers, the librarian, the LD department chair, and a guidance counselor participated. A number of other teachers expressed interest, requesting that additional sub time be provided.

Although at the end of the 2003-2004 school year the majority of teachers were not yet using Blackboard with their students, many made the initial leap, and all teachers were aware that they had accounts and had been introduced to many of Blackboard's features and benefits. Individual teachers asked for training. For example, an English as Second Language Teacher (ESOL) teacher wanted to know how to use the digital drop box. Once trained, she used it with her students when they were completing a PowerPoint project to provide secure storage for their documents between work sessions. Later in the school year, when teachers were asked how they were using Blackboard and if they felt it was effective, this is what Candace (the ESOL teacher) said:

I'm using the Digital Drop Box in Blackboard with all of my ESOL B2 classes. This is a good way for students to save files in a secure location and to send them to me. Blackboard is relatively effective for this purpose. ...

I have also presented PowerPoint shows in class ...and then posted them in Blackboard so students can review this information on their own. In addition, I have developed several activities practicing parts of speech that I posted to Blackboard so students can practice on their own. Blackboard is (theoretically) very effective for these purposes. Unfortunately, I don't think most of my students are actually accessing this information.

Since many of my students do not have access to the Internet at home, I do not post assignments in Blackboard.

I'm likely to use Blackboard in the future for these purposes.

Many teachers voluntarily used Blackboard to post homework, others used the digital drop box, and still others explored the use of the discussion board during the 2003-2004 school year. However, many of our teachers believed that too few of our students have Internet access from home, making it pointless to post homework assignments. To determine the accuracy of these perceptions, teachers were asked:

2. The reward, a Hershey candy bar, was wrapped in a "Technology Nutrition Label" (see Appendix B) and placed in the teacher's mailbox when the survey was completed.

Adopting Blackboard, continued

What percentage of your students do you think have reliable Internet access at home?
 Teachers answered:

Less than 25%	11%
Between 25% and 50%	39%
Between 50% and 75%	42%
More than 75%	8%

Students were asked a similar question:

Other than at school, where do you access the Internet? Students responded:

At home	80%
At a friend's house	19%
At the library	16%
I don't use the Internet outside of school.	3%

The implications of this very powerful piece of information seem clear. With such a high percentage of students having convenient access to the Internet, there is a tremendous opportunity to use Blackboard to improve communication. If used effectively by teachers, administrators, students and parents, Blackboard may help to increase parent involvement.

At our final faculty meeting in June, this survey finding was presented to the faculty in a PowerPoint presentation that featured teachers stating how they currently use Blackboard and their plans for future use. Seeing the multitude of possible benefits, and encouraged by the cluster director, our principal, referring to the PowerPoint presentation, announced her decision to require all teachers to post homework assignments in Blackboard in 2004-2005.

Progress continues this year. Parents were introduced to Blackboard with a letter included in the opening of school packet, through a flyer at back-to-school night, and through a letter providing their child's user ID and password. Teachers participated in a 90 minute Blackboard training session during the first week of school. Additional training has been provided through FCPS academy classes and is ongoing in the form of optional need-specific individual and group sessions. During the initial training, the navigation bar for all Poe MS courses was standardized to simplify navigation for parents. Teachers enrolled administrators and guidance counselors in their classes, both for the enrollment training and for the benefit of the administrators and guidance counselors. Teachers were also shown how to make classes available and how to post homework. They were charged with having their classes available by the end of September and with posting updated homework assignments once a week.

Adopting Blackboard, continued

In September, English teachers were to see that all students accessed their Blackboard account and changed their password. Letters with the student's password were to be sent home to parents. The majority of teachers accomplished this task; however, there are many students who still have not accessed their accounts, resulting in frustration for many students and teachers. To resolve this issue, the school's student TV station is preparing a public service announcement explaining how to log into Blackboard, change the password, and navigate the application. Over the course of a week TA³ teachers will have all students check to assure that they can login to Blackboard and that they have changed their password. Passwords will be recorded in a spreadsheet and shared with the student's teachers. A letter will again be sent to parents reinforcing the value of Blackboard and providing access to their child's account.

Additional uses of Blackboard at Poe MS include an administrative site sharing information with the staff (e.g., the school's master calendar), curriculum sites for collaboration and sharing content-specific information and lesson plans, and a library site providing access to the school's subscription databases, pathfinders, and the digital drop box for all staff and students.

Much progress has been made. Although most teachers are only fulfilling their minimum requirement and a number have chosen to ignore the requirement, still others are going beyond the minimum by using the digital drop box and posting resources and documents. With any new technology, full adoption will take time. As teachers observe instructional benefits and improved student and parent communication experienced by their colleagues, they will gradually adopt this tool. Blackboard is not a one-size-fits-all tool, but as teachers begin to embrace it, they will find the best fit for themselves and their students.

About the Author

Nancy Hoskins, an educator for 27 years, is currently a school-based technology specialist with Fairfax County Public Schools, Va. She began her career as a Home Economics teacher in western Pennsylvania, has a master's degree in Secondary School Mathematics from Western Maryland College, and has been with FCPS for 14 years. She became involved with Teacher Research as an SBTS in 2003. She can be reached at: Nancy.Hoskins@fcps.edu



3. TA is a 30 minute class period similar to homeroom.

Adopting Blackboard, Appendix A (N. Hoskins)

Letter to Parents

[SCHOOL LETTERHEAD]

Dear Parent,

You may have heard of FCPS 24-7 Learning or Blackboard and wonder how your student at Poe Middle School will use it. I hope your questions will be answered by this letter.

What is FCPS 24-7 Learning or Blackboard?

Fairfax County Public Schools, FCPS, has provided a Blackboard account to each student. This is an online tool that allows FCPS to extend learning beyond the traditional school day and beyond school buildings by allowing students to see homework, classroom assignments, resources, and much more from home.

When will my child begin to use Blackboard?

Every student has been given an account to use Blackboard. In order for the account to be active, one or more of your child's teachers must be using it. (Until at least one of your child's teachers uses Blackboard, your child will not use it.)

How will my child use Blackboard?

When a teacher begins to use Blackboard, students will be taken into a computer lab and taught how to use it. During the introduction, students will learn about how to login from any Internet location. They will be given a login ID and a password. This login and password, which will be sent to you at that time via U.S. mail, will allow you and your child to access the information from any Internet location.

How soon will this start?


At this time the use of FCPS 24-7 Learning (Blackboard.com) is optional at Poe. Teachers are receiving training on the use of FCPS 24-7 Learning. As teachers begin to use this product they will introduce the program to students in a lab setting. (*Public internet access is possible at George Mason Regional Library*). The address is <http://fcps.blackboard.com>. A link to FCPS 24-7 Learning is also found on both the FCPS home page <http://www.fcps.edu> and Poe Middle School's home page <http://www.fcps.edu/PoeMS>.

Sincerely,

June Monterio, Principal
Nancy Hoskins, School-Based Technology Specialist
Poe MS Technology Vanguard Committee

Adopting Blackboard, Appendix B (N. Hoskins)

Candy wrapper



Congratulations!
on navigating
Blackboard.com
... and THANK YOU for
taking the Technology Use
and Needs Assessment

This survey is part of a teacher research project. The information will help clarify the research question and plan training opportunities that address our staff's needs.

Nancy

Nutrition Facts:
Using Blackboard ...
*supports our School Improvement Plan
*save paper
*eases access to important school wide documents
*allows for collaboration in a Professional Learning Community