Blackboard Tips for Faculty
February 1, 2011

What’s in Your Menu?

When you walk into your classroom, you quickly notice where your teaching station is located and the arrangement of the student workspace. Depending on the activities of the day, you might make adjustments to the environment. When students enter your room, they take their places. It’s also important to recognize the environment of your Blackboard course. When students enter your course, it may not be clear where their place is, due to the layers and invisibility of content and activities in your course. The navigation bar, or menu, on the left, can help them find information and work productively.

“The menu in your course has default items which you can customize. These may appear as a list of links or as “buttons” along the left side of your course.” You can also add new items for content or activities that may be referenced often by your students. This tip will discuss some options that may simplify how you and your students work in your Blackboard course environment.

Standard menu items include the basics of your course: Faculty, Syllabus, MyGrades, Tools, and Help. Maintaining a common look for the course helps students quickly recognize common activities and resources in their classes, enabling them to focus on your unique material. Let’s visit about these standard items before discussing ways to customize your course.

- **Faculty.** This is a very useful place to add your Profile and contact information. It is easily and quickly accessible to your students. It also helps CILT support staff quickly find your email address to contact you if a student has contacted them for assistance (your information is not always accessible in the UND directory or we may not be able to see your syllabus). Although the common name is Faculty, the Blackboard tool is Contacts (useful if you’re adding a Faculty button in your course).

- **Syllabus.** Posting your syllabus in the course means that your students won’t lose their copy, and saves paper. Your syllabus can be easily updated if necessary. Some faculty include a schedule in their syllabus. However, we recommend that you post a separate calendar or schedule which can be modified due to interruptions or changes in your course plans. Posting a separate schedule also allows you to make quick modifications when a course is taught for several semesters: fall, spring, summer, while not impacting the core information in the syllabus.

- **MyGrades.** This menu item is a convenient link directly to the Grade Center. However, it’s only for student use. You will access the Grade Center through the Control Panel, which gives you more options for seeing the full grade center, only items that need grading, or any other “smart view” you create, such as a smart view for separate class sections in a combined Blackboard site.

- **Help.** The Help link connects you and students to the CILT Live Help site, for assistance 7 days a week. Blackboard help is also available by clicking on the Blackboard Help tab at the top of each page.

- **Tools.** The tools item displays the typical features of Blackboard. There are many options. Sometimes options may be confusing to students so it is recommended that you select “Hide Link” for the options you are not using in the course. Even if you are using some of the features in the course, you may wish to hide them in the Tools areas so that students access them through your designated Content areas. Keep in mind that the only way for students to email you and each other from within the course is by using the Send Email option under Tools.
Other standard menu items might include the following. If you don’t see them in your course, but would like to include them, please contact CILT.

- **Textbooks.** This link directs students to the University Bookstore site [http://www.und.bkstr.com](http://www.und.bkstr.com) to order their textbooks. They'll need to know your section (class) number. Check the link to see what information appears, and contact the bookstore if there is an error.

- **SMARTTHINKING.** This page has information about the 24/7 online tutoring service available to all UND campus and distance students, which includes a writing center for student assistance with papers. SMARTTHINKING is also accessed using the Services tab at the top of the Blackboard page.

- **Bb Basics.** This menu item directs students to a "self-help" course on using Blackboard, blogs, wikis, submitting assignments, completing quizzes and exams, and viewing grades. You won’t need to instruct students how to use these features of Blackboard by directing them there. Every student enrolled in a UND course is also enrolled in the “Blackboard Student Orientation Course – Spring 2011.”

Customize your menu for content, assignments, weekly material, or ongoing activities. Organizing your menu keeps students from getting lost in this virtual space. Using folders within each menu items provides additional structure. They also provide flexibility, as you can create information yet make it unavailable to students until the proper time. Here are some suggestions:

- **Resources.** Posting general resources for your course in one place is convenient for you and the students to see what is helpful in the course.

- **Content.** You can add folders for each week or class meeting to contain everything necessary for that class period or week. For example, you could post lecture notes, PowerPoint slides, discussion forums or blogs, or assignment links for students to submit work directly to the Grade Center. Placing everything together in one folder provides one central location for students to access material and submit work at that point in time, similar to a class sessions. You could rename this menu item as “lessons” or “weeks” or “topics” as appropriate to your course.

- **Ongoing Activities.** Perhaps students in your course will be keeping a journal throughout the semester, or working through several stages of a project. Another type of ongoing activity might be Exams or Quizzes. Providing a menu item such as “Journal”, “Project” or Quizzes keeps all of the relevant information in one area, yet is only one click away from participation.

To customize your menu, select the “Add Menu Item” icon (upper left of menu) and choose the appropriate option. *Creating a Content Area* is similar to setting up a very large folder. *Creating a Tool Link* is a convenient way to link directly to a Blackboard tool. *Create an External Link* allows you to link directly to an external website. You can also add subheaders and dividers to visually organize your menu. Click the arrows on the right of any menu item to change its name or make it visible/hidden to your students. Use the arrows on the left of the menu item to drag it up or down until the list is reorganized to your satisfaction.

If you would more information on customizing your menu to provide a welcoming, yet streamlined way for students to move around in your course, please contact an instructional designer at CILT.