The Benefits of Online Learning
OVERVIEW

Academic institutions agree that Web-based learning environments offer sound pedagogical benefits. Nearly 50 percent of higher education institutions currently offer some type of online learning to enhance their classroom environments. According to a study by the National Education Association (NEA) released in June 2000, faculty teaching Web-based courses give these courses a similar or better rating than their own traditional courses on meeting the following seven pedagogical goals:

- Giving students access to information
- Developing student interactivity
- Providing students with high-quality course material
- Improving quantitative skills
- Assessing the educational effectiveness of the course
- Addressing the variety of student learning styles
- Helping students master the subject matter

The benefits of e-Learning are becoming more and more evident as an increasing number of institutions – large and small, public and private – adopt the medium. Far from being impersonal, standardized, and bland, online learning environments provide highly individualized and exciting educational experiences for students. Meeting these pedagogical goals should be a key objective in the development of any e-Learning software platform.

Built from the ground up for education, Blackboard 5™ offers both instructors and students a variety of flexible, customizable tools to enrich the online environment. Combining a state-of-the-art course Web site management system (Level One) with a customizable institutional portal (Level Two), and integration with multiple administrative systems (Level Three), Blackboard 5 is a complete e-Learning solution that specifically addresses key pedagogical goals and offers multiple ways to achieve them.

MEETING PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

One of the key benefits of an online learning environment is that the Internet is up and running 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Students have access to course materials, communication tools, and external resources any time of the day or night. If a student prefers to work at 4:00 AM rather than 10:00 AM, he or she can still ask a question of an instructor, take a quiz, or participate in an ongoing discussion with classmates. Accessing external resources for research can be done from home and during times when a trip to the library may not be possible.
Blackboard 5 offers a number of tools that give students the highest level of access to the information they need most. Course materials, handouts, quizzes, and other information are uploaded to the course site, so students can access them any time. Message boards allow instructors to post announcements to keep students up-to-date about assignments, changes, or other class information. Blackboard’s Academic Resource Center (reached via www.blackboard.com) is an online academic resource center featuring news, links to relevant external Web sites, and other materials—thoroughly reviewed by the Blackboard editorial staff, and updated regularly. The Academic Resource Center is discipline-specific and customizable. Instructors can customize listings and search options to ensure relevance to specific courses.

DEVELOPING STUDENT INTERACTIVITY
Using the Internet, each person in a discussion group can make comments at the same time. Thus, students can participate in online discussions more easily, and absorb more information in a shorter time. Moreover, some students, who might be reluctant to participate in a face-to-face classroom discussion, appreciate the measure of anonymity offered by an Internet-based discussion. Finally, online discussions can be ongoing and take place at times when a classroom or face-to-face discussion would be impractical or impossible. Access to email means that students can communicate with instructors and each other at any hour, reducing reliance on traditional office hours and scheduled class times. Instructors can establish “online office hours” or answer student emails on a set schedule, whichever is most convenient.

The Blackboard 5 platform provides all of these important communication tools. Discussion and collaboration tools can be customized to create smaller groups within a class for project work. Other customization options include:

- Managing online discussions: Sort messages by author, date and/or title; “collect” all messages in a printer-friendly format; and archive discussions at any time
- Sharing documents as discussion board attachments or through the Digital Dropbox, an easy-to-use file sharing facility
- Holding virtual office hours or field trips through the updated Virtual Classroom™ environment with real-time chat, white-board and slide creation/upload

PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY SUBJECT MATTER
In an online environment, instructors can provide students with the same high-quality, discipline-specific course materials that they offer in a traditional classroom setting. However, instructors are spared the time-consuming, expensive process of copying or purchasing multiple copies of textbooks or handouts. Slides, videos, audio recordings, assessment tools, and other materials can be easily uploaded to a course Web site and edited as needed. Many academic publishers now offer extensive compilations of course materials specifically designed for online education.
With Blackboard 5, instructors can create, upload, and revise course materials easily, without needing to know HTML or other coding languages. Blackboard has formed partnerships with many of the best academic publishers to create Course Cartridges – downloadable collections of publisher-created content that include assessment tools and multimedia presentations to enhance course Web sites. Instructors can also include videotapes of class lectures, links to useful external Web sites, and other types of content. Combined with the customizable Academic Resource Center, Course Cartridges provide instructors and students with more high-quality subject matter than ever before.

**BENEFITS 4 AND 5: IMPROVING QUANTITATIVE SKILLS AND ASSESSING EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

Quantitative skills – those that can be measured based on retention of specific facts or data – can be constantly challenged in an online learning environment. Quizzes and other assessment tools provide valuable information about a student’s grasp of particular concepts or skills. Instant feedback helps a student and an instructor identify specific knowledge gaps and address them before the student falls behind.

The Blackboard 5 platform provides a number of tools that allow both students and instructors to measure the effectiveness of the online course and materials on an ongoing basis. The platform supports multiple test and question types and allows for password-protected or timed tests in the same manner as a classroom environment. Instructors can create statistical reports of student answers to particular questions to ensure that certain benefit concepts have been successfully introduced.

**ADDRESSING A VARIETY OF LEARNING STYLES**

Students learn at different paces and in different ways. Online learning environments provide a number of benefits that address this diversity of learning styles. For example, some students are visual learners – a video may be the best way for them to learn a particular piece of content. Others feel and learn their best at 3:00 AM, when the instructor may be fast asleep. Online learning allows some students to focus on specific course sections, without restricting their classmates’ ability to move ahead. The ability to overcome these types of obstacles may be the biggest benefit to online learning.

In the Blackboard 5 environment, students gain access to a wide variety of content and tools to ensure their success. The ability to include a variety of content types (students need not be required to utilize them all) ensures that visual learners get the same content as verbal learners. Twenty-four-hour availability gives both night owls and early birds access to a full range of course materials at any time. Ease of use and access to supplemental materials help slower learners grasp and retain difficult concepts.
HELPING STUDENTS MASTER THE SUBJECT MATTER
All of the benefits discussed above lead toward achieving the most important benchmark: helping students master the subject matter. Current research suggests that the benefits of online education cut across the boundaries of student age, type of institution, and proximity to the physical classroom. The online learning environment helps the instructor show students how to self-direct their learning, which makes their mastery of a subject more likely. Success leads to improved motivation and ultimately better learners.

Blackboard’s award-winning course management software was originally developed in conjunction with instructors at Cornell University. The tools and functions of the Blackboard 5 platform are designed to maximize the teaching and learning experience from both sides. Students and instructors alike benefit from the ease of use, access to information, and multiple means of assessment provided by the platform.