# Distance Learning Systems

## Teaching Tips

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Distance Learning Systems

Teaching Tip #1: The Distance Education Technology Toolbox

Most instructors have discovered, whether through experience or word of mouth, that there is a sometimes bewildering array of instructional technology available to enhance and supplement course delivery.

In this inaugural Teaching Tips weekly mailing, we would like to take a few moments to provide a synopsis of tools that are available to you, and provide some context for more information to come.

- **Blackboard** ([http://classes.uaf.edu/](http://classes.uaf.edu/)) — Blackboard is the primary, web-based Learning Management System (LMS) employed at UAF. Operated by the UAF Center for Academic Technology, Blackboard provides a suite of secure, asynchronous course tools including materials and document delivery, gradebook, discussion boards, and online quizzes and surveys. Blackboard is the primary portal for students to access primary materials or be linked to other educational technology resources.

- **Horizon Live** ([http://live.dist-ed.uaf.edu/](http://live.dist-ed.uaf.edu/)) — Horizon Live provides a synchronous Internet component for course delivery. It may be used in conjunction with Blackboard materials as well as videoconference and/or audioconference presentations. Horizon Live includes tools for presenting PowerPoint presentations, images, and web materials accompanied by real-time two-way audio using a single internet connection of robust 28.8k or higher bandwidth. It also provides a shared whiteboard, polling, surveying, and other tools which are still being tested by DLS.

- **Videoconferencing** — The University has spent considerable effort implementing a network for two-way videoconferencing, including “quality of service” guarantees. This enables real-time, two-way videoconference using dedicated equipment ranging in size from desktop cameras to full-room installations, some paired with Internet display. Videoconferences can include multiple points at each MAU, including the four CRA extended campuses, as well as many schools in villages serviced by GCI. Although this technology does not extend beyond the University network, it provides a great new way to reach a sizable group of students.

- **Audioconferencing** — The traditional Alaskan distance education workhorse, particularly for smaller sites serviced by the College of Rural Alaska, audioconference is a tried and true technology that will remain a part of instruction for many years to come. At DLS, we are creating ways to pedagogically improve audioconference delivery by integrating other technologies and to transform the curriculum—in whole or in part—to accommodate other delivery models.

- **Smartboard** — “Smartboard” installations combine dedicated videoconferencing display with a 67” touch screen monitor and an Internet ready computer. This allows an instructor to simultaneously utilize any of the technologies outlined above when delivering to students on the network that also have access to either a Smartboard or another videoconference endpoint and computer. Currently, CDE has placed Smartboard installations in Bethel, Dillingham, Kotzebue, Nome, and on the Fairbanks Campus in the Brooks Building.

More Resources

For more information on these and other important technologies, check out the Distance Learning Systems website ([http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)), and feel free to contact Chris Lott ([chris.lott@uaf.edu](mailto:chris.lott@uaf.edu), 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems for personalized assistance.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #2: Best Practices for Videoconference Delivery

Videoconferencing is a venerable technology being rejuvenated at UA by better equipment and higher bandwidth connections to campuses. Although effective use is limited to sites on the UA Wide Area Network, videoconference provides an exciting alternative to audioconference delivery or face-to-face meetings, which can be expensive, unwieldy, difficult to manage, and not well suited to some materials.

In this week’s Teaching Tip, we present a synopsis of some of the more important Best Practices for Videoconference Delivery in general:

- **Test First** - Take a few minutes at the beginning of each session to test the equipment. Use this time to take roll call, ask for introductions, etc.

- **Pay Attention to Clothing** - Unlike audioconference, you probably should wear clothes when teaching over videoconference. The clothes you pick should use muted colors and avoid high contrast patterns, bright shades and solid white—all of which can cause glare.

- **Speak and Gesture Clearly** - Videoconference technology is good, but not perfect, so you must learn to speak clearly and avoid overly quick or broad gestures.

- **Smile at the Camera** - Maintain “eye contact” with your students through the active camera. Resist the temptation to stare at the screen when you are speaking.

- **Avoid “Camera Sickness”** - Excessive camera movement can dissociate your students from the material, not to mention inducing nausea. Keep a wide enough camera angle that the camera doesn’t normally have to move to follow you…. a good rule of thumb is to position the camera so the edge of the picture falls between your hands and elbows with your arms outstretched.

- **Use Visual Aids** - Take advantage of the video presentation to do more than you might with an audioconference: use props, refer to books your students will have with them, whatever it takes to engage your students.

- **Foster Interactivity** - A “good” class pedagogically will be interactive. Ask questions, engage your students in dialogue. Think of your course as an interactive seminar not just a lecture.

- **Establish Structure** - Make clear to your students how you want to provide for interaction. Are you open for interruption or will you provide specific times for questions and answers? Involve students from the start, try to learn and use individual names, be flexible with discussion.

- **Become Familiar with Remote Sites** - You can better serve your students with knowledge of their location. Then you can help students find a bathroom, access a fax machine or copier, etc.

- **Be Multimodal** - Utilize various modes of learning in conjunction videoconferencing: synchronous and asynchronous web presentation, video/DVD materials, and print resources.

**More Resources**

For more information on videoconference teaching and the videoconference network, contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)
The sheer novelty of using videoconferencing for the first time will serve to engage learners… for a while. What can you do to foster interaction and increase the quality of your distance class?

First, it is useful to define a few terms. By interaction, we refer to learner involvement. This involvement can be between student and instructor, student and material, or student to student. By quality interaction we refer to a concept aptly summarized this way:

“[It] necessitates students working on real-world problems, students working in teams to find solutions, and consistent dialogue among class members and with the instructor. Additionally, the questions posed should involve higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation, analysis, and synthesis rather than rote memorization.”


The visual nature of videoconference delivery inherently increases interactivity in basic ways formerly limited to face-to-face interaction. But there are a few fundamental ways to explicitly engage the medium and various accoutrements available to you at UAF.

**Charge Up Your Physical Material Delivery.** Make use of the camera to provide more than just a talking head. You can use props and physical demonstrations with any videoconference setup. If available, utilize document cameras—but be sure to provide the material in advance or use LARGE TYPE (24pt type, landscape) so it is legible onscreen.

**Provide Explicit Structures for Interaction.** Multi-modal delivery can seem chaotic to teacher and learner alike. Everyone involved will appreciate an explicit structure for interaction. Simply accommodating and facilitating round-robin discussions is a simple way to get started. Assigning graded team work that can be completed using email, chat, break-out rooms, or discussion boards might also make your class more effective.

**Go Digital.** A document camera, where available, is a fine way to show three dimensional objects, book covers, and properly prepared papers. The same document camera might be used with a laptop for rudimentary PowerPoint presentations. But to really make use of materials in a fashion that engages students in the learning process, a complementary tool like Horizon Live is essential. With its set of whiteboard, chat, annotation, and polling features you can banish passive learning from your course.

**More Resources**

For more information on videoconference teaching and the videoconference network, contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)
Audioconferencing is a mainstay of educational delivery in the College of Rural Alaska, and continuing discussions on the CRA-L mailing list suggest it will remain so for some time. For this week’s tip we bring together our own experience and that of some CRA Faculty—old and new—to present some information useful to every faculty member using audioconference delivery.

**Supportive Impression**

As in a traditional course, but perhaps to an even greater degree, a good first impression is important in making students comfortable and prepared for success, and maintaining this good start is critical to a successful outcome. A good impression is a supportive impression. This includes:

- An inviting, positive welcome letter for each student
- A clearly written, complete syllabus
- Friendly, prepared, organized instruction during audio sessions
- Quick return of corrected and commented homework
- Demonstrated willingness to meet student needs as a group and individually

**Class Materials**

Distributing materials ahead of time is a necessity, of course. But there are some finer points to keep in mind:

- When mailing materials early, use different colors so you can refer to pages by color.
- Always use page numbers and footers to help students keep items in order and make it easy to reference material during live class sessions.
- Choice of a textbook or other external materials is of heightened importance for an audio course where students will work with it independently. Choose a text that will do the best job without you.

**Reducing Interpersonal Distance**

Students taking audioconference courses can feel isolated for a variety of reasons: physical distance, lack of local academic support, cultural diversity issues, and technical problems being just a few of them. In addition to maintaining a supportive environment, there are ways to help reduce this sense of distance between student, instructor, and peers:

- Learn all your students’ names.
- Provide a photo and bio to all students. Have students share theirs.
- Hold a pre-course audioconference to discuss procedures and structure for sessions
- Establish a method for questions. All students should preface comments and questions with their names and locations.
- Have all students introduce themselves to one another.

**More Resources**

For more information on videoconference teaching and the videoconference network, contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems.

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1 Illingworth, Ron. Presentation at the National Association for Developmental Education. March 2002.
2 Bailey, Jodi. Email correspondence with the Authors. May 2003.
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #5: Creating Community with Asynchronous Online Discussion

The literature is rife with documentation of the importance of creating a community for distance education students. Online discussion groups (also known as forums or bulletin boards) are a valuable tool for creating such communities, whether your class is wholly or partially distance delivered—or even face-to-face! At UAF, you have immediate access to a discussion group for your class as part of the Blackboard system (http://classes.uaf.edu/). But simply enabling the tool in Blackboard will not spontaneously create a community!

Terminology. A message added to a discussion board is a post. A series of posts in response to an initial message (or to each other) is a thread. Thus you will often hear reference to threaded discussion forums. Discussion boards are an asynchronous tool, accessible at different times by different people. Don’t confuse this with chat which is a synchronous discussion, such as the type provided the Blackboard virtual classroom tool.

Managing Course Integration. You must integrate the discussion board into your course delivery. If you make discussion board use an optional course “extra” you will receive little participation. Participation is the key to community. Some basic strategies to encourage participation are:

- Make forum participation part of your grading rubric (not effective by itself)
- “Open” and “close” discussions on certain dates.
- Where possible, direct Q&A that might be handled via email to the discussion boards
- Create directed discussions by being an active conversation starter and participant. Don’t be afraid to interject yourself into threads multiple times to guide discussion as you would in a classroom.
- Encourage topical online debate, perhaps even dividing your students into position groups.
- Require unique contributions. One UAF faculty member requires that students post unique responses to his starter questions. This forces students to read previous material and rewards early participation.
- Make a quick polling question the start of a thread… and kindling for a longer discussion.
- Use discussion threads for roundtable critiques and peer evaluation of papers, ideas, and projects.
- Make use of role playing. For example, have a student play the part of an author or political figure and allow peers to ask questions and engage in debate.
- Appoint temporary student facilitators. Peer-to-peer learning is important to any community—taking on the role of “teacher” will force students to reflect, synthesize, and anticipate.

Creating a Strong Learning Environment. You must see yourself as a participant, moderator and—most importantly—a facilitator. Recognize every contribution, as even the smallest might be the tentative first steps of a student on their way to success. It is up to you to make your students feel safe to say what they think and feel.

Teaching and Modeling Collaboration and Analytical Discussion. You shouldn’t assume that your students know how to conduct an online discussion, and even those who are familiar with the concept might not understand that it is not purely a social outlet. Model active learning, questioning, collaboration, reflection, and discussion by being an active participant yourself.

Recognizing Success. We will discuss evaluating the effectiveness of discussion forums in a future Tip, but one quick gauge can be found by examining student participation. If students are interacting out of their own initiative, rather than solely through directed, graded discussion, you have one unmistakable sign of success.

Considering the Long Term. The temporal benefit of online discussions goes beyond the convenience of current learners. Archived discussions can be a valuable resource for future learners, allowing them to find (or you to direct them to) answers to their own questions in a context richer than you may spontaneously provide.
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #6: Effective PowerPoint Presentations

We’ve all had the dubious pleasure of being audience-members for lackluster presentations featuring Microsoft PowerPoint or other presentation tools. With the growing popularity of PowerPoint in the classroom, some tips and hints on creating an effective presentation are in order. Many of these tips are valid for face-to-face presentations as well as asynchronous delivery, while some cater to the unique needs of online delivery.

Above all else, it is important to keep in mind that PowerPoint and other such tools were designed to serve as aids for presenters and as one component of a comprehensive delivery of curriculum. The static nature of PowerPoint presentations, particularly when “flattened” for delivery via the Internet, does not intrinsically lend itself to student engagement and interaction.

Basic Tips

- Good presentation design is structured and planned to enhance and refer to information material being presented in other ways, whether face-to-face, documents, textbooks, or other sources.
- Design for simplicity and clarity. Provide a reference to—rather than duplicating—existing information.
- Break text up into pointed, bite-sized chunks, accommodating the screen-size and attention-span of your audience.
- Avoid low-contrast backgrounds and themes—many of the standard templates that come with PowerPoint are too low-contrast (black on light blue, etc).
- Leave a margin around your slide material to accommodate audience screen size and resolution.
- Use the “master slide” feature to place repetitive elements, such as those used for branding, copyright, location, and identification.
- Layout should accommodate the 4-unit wide, 3-unit high ratio (rectangle) used by monitors/screens.
- Design material to be integrated into your presentation in landscape (horizontal) mode.
- Use a sans-serif font such as Arial, Helvetica, or Verdana at a minimum size of 24 points.

Tips for Asynchronous Delivery

- For Horizon Live, start with a base format of 9.7x4.5 inches, but be prepared for the user to scale material as they wish to suit their environment.
- Make sure all slides have titles. Your material should make sense and be clearly labeled in outline view.
- Use the slide notes pane to provide longer text references and other materials, pointers to class materials… information that would—in a face-to-face situation—be part of the accompanying lecture.
- Don’t embed necessary rich content. Transitions, animations, embedded sound and graphics, and in some cases links, will not necessarily be retained by the tool used to deliver your presentation. We can help you with better ways to deliver this necessary rich content.
- Don’t mistake PowerPoint as a tool for complete content delivery. You can count on your goal-oriented audience having a longer attention span than causal browsers, but web pages, PDF files, Word documents, and textbooks are a more appropriate medium for delivering lengthy content. Use presentation tools for—well—presentations!
- Adapt and test your presentation. Provide your material as both a native PowerPoint file and a web version, which PowerPoint can create for you. If you are unhappy with those options, use Adobe Acrobat (free for all UAF faculty and staff) to create a PDF version, which will still be more accessible than the native file alone.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)
There is never enough time in the day for any instructor to create all the custom materials for a class he or she might wish. Textbooks, handouts, and visual displays enliven curriculum and keep students engaged in face-to-face classes. Online courses benefit from the same activities, but traditionally there are fewer ready materials available… and when something interesting is found on the WWW it might disappear before it can be used!

But there are better solutions. At DLS we are working on identifying, procuring, and documenting various utilities and tools to create engaging curriculum, which we will discuss future teaching tips. Available to you immediately, though, is a wealth of material known as Learning Objects (LOs).

Put simply, a Learning Object is a piece of reusable digital curriculum that you can integrate into your online class the same way you might use a handout, workbook, or material from a teacher’s guide. Most commonly the LO will simply be a site that you can link to, though some materials are available in a form that you can download and use, or even as a package that can be integrated directly into tools like BlackBoard.

Learn More About Learning Objects

- Instructional Use of Learning Objects– http://www.reusability.org/read/

Many Learning Objects have been gathered together into a number of repositories. The difference between general web links and making use of LOs, is that the learning objects are designed by educators to be curriculum units, and they should remain available over longer periods of time. Repositories catalog and index the LOs using standard descriptions, categories, and professional formats, making the objects easier to find and use. Some repositories allow you to create your own portfolio or collection of objects for easy access. Most require a free registration to access and make use of LOs, though some of the objects are available only for a fee or through programs of curriculum exchange.

Learn More About Learning Object Repositories


Find Learning Objects

- Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) – http://www.merlot.org/ – Links to many LOs, including annotations, assignments, and reviews.
- Campus Alberta Repository of Educational Objects (CAREO) – http://www.careo.org/ – Over 3500 learning objects across most disciplines.
- Science, Math, Engineering, Technology Education (SMETE) - http://www.smete.org/ – More pointers to indexes of materials than discrete curriculum, this will help you uncover many hard-to-find resources.

More Resources

If you need help or have other questions about using Learning Objects in your class, contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #8: Copyright, Fair Use, and Educators

With a new semester quickly approaching, many instructors find themselves revising old materials and creating new syllabi. Being creators themselves, it behooves instructors to pay attention to copyright law, which protects the rights of those who create materials while ensuring educational access.

About Copyright Law

Original materials are automatically protected by copyright upon creation for 50 years beyond the death of the author. The exclusive rights of the copyright holder include reproduction of the copyrighted work, distribution of copies of the work as sales, rentals, lease, or gifts, and rights to perform or display the work publicly.

About Fair Use

“Fair Use” is a concept defined by the Copyright Law of 1976 that defines situations in which copyrighted material may be used without permission. The three primary considerations for determining fair use are: brevity, spontaneity, and the cumulative effect. In other words, selections should be short, included “on the fly”, and should not have the effect of limiting sales. The law itself defines the conditions for fair use as:

- The purpose and character of the use must be educational or non profit in nature.
- Copied material must be an excerpt or a portion of the original work without being a critical portion.
- The teacher may not impair the marketability of the work.

Educator Guidelines

Current technologies such as the Internet, high-speed copiers, and scanners, make abuse of fair use all too easy. Educators and publishers have come up with an informal set of guidelines that define fair use in education:

- A complete article or story less than 2,500 words; 1,000 words or 10% (whichever is shorter) of a prose work that is excerpted; one illustration, chart, diagram, or picture per book or periodical issue; a short poem of less than 250 words, or an excerpt of a longer poem of not more than 250 words.
- The copying must be for only one course, and no more than one short poem, article, or story or two excerpts can be copied from the works of one author.
- Unauthorized copying may not be used to replace an anthology or compilation.
- Unauthorized copies may not be made of consumable works such as workbooks or standardized tests.
- Unauthorized copying may not substitute for the purchase of books, authorized reprints, or periodicals.
- The same instructor may not copy the same item without permission from term to term.
- Students cannot be charged beyond the actual cost of photocopying.

Multimedia Materials

Fair use generally allows for presentation of video and multimedia materials in the classroom, such as playing a video the class. The same holds true in a distance education context, with the exception that the broadcast of the material to the students must be in a closed circuit (limited to enrolled students only), delivered real-time, and cannot be archived. This is important to remember if you plan to use video materials in a videoconference class!

More Information

For more information, contact us, or peruse the following resources:

- Intellectual Property and Copyright - [http://www.uwex.edu/disted/intprop.html](http://www.uwex.edu/disted/intprop.html)

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #9: Usability and Readability for Online Educational Materials

In past Teaching Tips we have discussed methods for fostering interactivity in distance education. However, a positive, interactive experience can hinge on the literal composition of your materials just as much as the structure in which they are presented. This brings us to issues of usability and readability.

Usability
Usability is, quite simply, a measure of the ease with which a student can use your materials. This includes how easy it is to learn to navigate and interact, how easy it is to remember, and whether it is aesthetically pleasing or not. Different applications will endow each of these with various degrees of importance.

Readability
Readability is how easy it is to read or otherwise progress through your materials. This includes vocabulary, paragraph size, page length, physical layout and font choice, micro-content, and context.

Some Basic Advice
Although these areas are complex enough to keep many Doctoral candidates engrossed each year, it is possible to distill some basic guidelines which you should consider when creating your online materials:

- “Chunk” your materials. Break each unit down into a series of smaller, sequential pieces rather than one long page or document. Where feasible, provide reinforcement throughout the unit rather than just at the end. Blackboard provides a few ways of constructing material for sequential access that are better than the multiple single document model. We will investigate these options in a future Teaching Tip.
- Pay attention to vocabulary. As a subject matter expert it is very easy to fall into a way of speaking more suited for other professionals than your eager students.
- Choose suitable line and paragraph lengths. For onscreen reading, choose a font and column/table size combination that puts somewhere around 10-12 words per line, or 5 inches if you think that way. This is not a full margin-to-margin page!
- Provide direction. Especially with online materials, users tend to skim rather than read. Breaking material down with convenient stops for reinforcement and questions can help counter this. You may also want to provide more distinct goals for your students by tracking them into a set sequence and using repeated synopses.
- Use micro-content. Micro-content refers to elements which help keep your documents from turning into one massive block of text (like this document). This includes headlines and subheads, quotations and pull-quotes, teasers, appropriate page titles, and bulleted lists.
- Contextualize and enrich. One wonderful aspect of creating online materials is that you have the opportunity to provide a much richer experience for your students. This can range from the simple (and effective) provision of context through web links, optional materials, exercises and projects, to sophisticated additions such as audio, video, animation, and interactive applets.

Exploring Further
For more information on usability and readability specific to your situation and materials, please contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/
In our last Teaching Tip we mentioned that breaking lengthy material down into manageable pieces was a good thing for your students—and that there are multiple ways to present such sequential material in the Blackboard system employed at UAF. In this Teaching Tip we look at four methods for presenting this content, starting with the two most commonly used, and then moving on to two which have much more potential for making integrated, usable, and effective lessons.

To view examples of the concepts below, please navigate to the guest-accessible “Blackboard Demo Area” course in the UAF Blackboard system (http://classes.uaf.edu/). This course is in the category Development and Demonstration, and you may login in using your normal Blackboard ID or as a guest user.

**Multiple Individually Linked Documents**

The most common model used in current Blackboard courses is to upload a series of documents one at a time into the selected course area. This is illustrated by the first four entries in the “Course Documents” area of the demo course. While this method is perhaps the most straightforward, it is also the least usable for your students because it demands a lot of navigation from content to index and back, making your material appear disconnected. On a practical level, it takes more screen real-estate, though this can be mitigated by using folders.

**Multiple Linked Documents**

A more compact method is to load the first document, then modify that entry and continue adding further pages to it. This can be seen in the demo course folder labeled “Usability and Readability – Multiple Attachments.” However, this really only helps cosmetically—making the index of a folder of documents more compact and making it clear that a series of documents are linked together—but does little to improve the student experience.

**Linked Module**

An underused feature of Blackboard is the ability to import an entire “module” of linked documents at one time. If you are handy with constructing web pages or other documents that have their own internal navigation, you can put the whole series into a folder, compress them into a ZIP file, and then load them in as a single Blackboard unit. Blackboard will give you the option to choose which document the students should start with. This method can be seen in the “Usability and Readability — Linked Module” folder in the demo course. This is a particularly useful feature if you are using similar materials in another context, and it greatly improves the student experience by making the material more cohesive. However, you will have to create some kind of navigation within your documents themselves, which can be time consuming.

**Blackboard Learning Unit**

Blackboard has its own facility for creating a sequential series of instruction called a Learning Unit. By creating a learning unit and then adding a series of documents, links, and files, you can create a structured curriculum path without having to create the internal navigation yourself. This method can be see in the “Usability and Readability — Learning Unit” section of the demo course. In this model, you can control whether the student must access the material sequentially (as we have in the sample) or if they can jump around using the Contents button available in the learning unit.

**More Resources**

You can read more about learning units starting on page 85 of the Blackboard Instructors Manual, available online at: http://cat.uaf.edu/misc_files/Bb56-LS-Instructor.pdf. Also, feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems for personalized assistance.
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #11: Weblogs for Education

If you pay much attention to news and discussion concerning the Internet, you’ve probably heard of the weblog (or blog) phenomenon. Even if you’re not quite sure what they are, it’s hard not to know that weblogs are big news. And if you are familiar with them, you may not have thought about their pedagogical potential.

**Weblogs Defined**

The term “weblog” encompasses a range of ideas and implementations. For our purposes, a weblog is a regularly updated page or section of a site that is maintained through a simple web interface. Most commonly, these updates appear on the site in chronological order. The administrator or owner of the weblog might be the only person adding content, or it might be open to multiple authors, even a whole class. You can see an example of a typical weblog (in fact, a weblog created as the final project for a USC class in weblogging and journalism) at: [http://journalism.berkeley.edu/projects/biplog/](http://journalism.berkeley.edu/projects/biplog/) — the main weblog is the white column on the left.

**The Weblog Advantage**

Weblogs, and the software that powers them, provide a number of important advantages over traditional web publishing options and work well in tandem with learning management systems like Blackboard. The most important qualities being:

- Easy publishing through a single login and a simple web form
- Multiple authors can publish to the same weblog

Since adding new material to a weblog is so simple—requiring no knowledge of HTML or other nerdy skills—and you can easily allow a group of students to contribute, it is easy to create a classroom learning community around whatever topic you need without the extra overhead of learning a complex technology. Creating a community for your students is an excellent way to improve their learning experience.

**What to Weblog**

Weblogs can serve many roles in the classroom. At their simplest, they are a simple mechanism for posting news, announcements, and ad-hoc materials. This can be a boon for the instructor who is not using the web at all (or only minimally), but is of limited value to a Blackboard user. The more important uses are those which capitalize on the interaction and multiple-author capabilities of the weblog to do things like:

- Create a collaborative topical resource
- Provide peer coaching and interaction
- Build research and product portfolios
- Stimulate topical discussions
- Assemble student journals
- Contextualize curriculum

**Get Started with a Weblog**

We have much more information on weblogs, including links to tools, resources and further examples at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/weblogs/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/weblogs/) or contact contact Chris Lott ([chris.lott@uaf.edu](mailto:chris.lott@uaf.edu), 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems for personalized assistance utilizing this useful tool to your class!

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #12: Beyond Google… The Invisible Web

Whatever subject you teach—regardless of the delivery method you use to reach your students—the World Wide Web can be a valuable resource. However, finding what you really need in that wealth of material can be a frustrating task. For many, the advent of Google appears to have solved this problem and rendered other general web search engines obsolete at the same time. But educators, researchers, and other academics often have needs which go beyond Google and its kin, into a realm known as the *invisible web*.

**Exposing the Invisible Web**

The invisible web (or the *deep web*) is that mass of information available on the web that is not indexed by general web search tools like Google. Generally these resources—including databases, archives, and specialized search engines—are themselves indexed and searchable… if you can find them! Google is a fantastic index that should be the logical starting point for most web searching, but limiting yourself to what these traditional search engines are able and allowed to index is like assuming you know the contents of an entire department store based on perusing a sale flyer. In fact, Danny Sullivan, editor of The Search Engine Report [http://searchenginewatch.com/], writes that as little as 1/500th of the information available on the web is actually indexed by common search engines at all!

**Searching the Invisible Web**

Although the landscape of web resources is in a constant state of flux, there are a few useful starting points for moving beyond the simple keyword search (in truth, even general keyword searching is not as simple as you might think, a topic for a future teaching tip). These sites will allow you to locate relevant sites and/or search them directly:

- Librarian’s Index to the Internet – [http://lii.org/](http://lii.org/)

**UAF Databases**

Many of these deep resources are free for everyone… however, some carry a substantial access fee. Fortunately, the Rasmuson Library and the State of Alaska have made a number of stellar fee-based archives and indexes available at no charge to members the UAF community. Explore these at:

- Rasmuson Library Online Databases - [http://www.uaf.edu/library/onlinedatabases/](http://www.uaf.edu/library/onlinedatabases/)

**Going Further**

For additional information, including more links to search engines, directories, and articles about accessing and searching the invisible web, check out our web resources at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/invisiweb/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/invisiweb/). Feel free to contact contact Chris Lott ([chris.lott@uaf.edu](mailto:chris.lott@uaf.edu), 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems for personalized assistance.

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For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/)
Portfolios can be powerful educational tools. As a supplement to—or a replacement for—more traditional assessment activities, portfolios require students to engage and demonstrate their skills in problem-solving and synthesis and provide a concrete demonstration of a student’s ability, knowledge, and achievement.

**Types of Portfolio**

The most common kind of portfolio is the showcase portfolio, which simply brings together a selection of a student’s best work for presentation. This is a tried and true capstone project in some kinds of classes. But this base can be enhanced in a number of ways to serve different needs:

- Developmental portfolios contain a series of samples over a longer time period, demonstrating the student’s learning. These portfolios are often supplemented with student self-assessment.
- Proficiency portfolios are created to demonstrate competence and performance in an area given a specified set of outcomes and competencies.
- Reflective portfolios bind student self-assessment and reflection to curriculum materials. Such a portfolio may have no “finished products” at all other than the valuable aggregate of the portfolio itself.
- Employment portfolios are directed collections tying pedagogy to “real world” needs. An employment portfolio may be extracted from a larger developmental or reflective portfolio.

**The E-Folio**

Paired with the Internet and commonly available computer technologies, the common portfolio can be transformed into an electronic portfolio (e-folio). E-folios are typically created using a combination of common computer files such as Word documents, PDF, PowerPoint, digital images, and basic web pages, presented on the WWW. A portfolio may contain a weblog (see Teaching Tip #11 at [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/teaching-tips-11.pdf](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/teaching-tips-11.pdf) for more information) or a weblog may be the structure that contains the whole e-folio, particularly for reflective projects.

An e-folio allows students to incorporate a wide array of resources into their finished product, including photo, sound, and even video. As a side-benefit, e-folios provide a mechanism for assessment that neatly bypasses issues of potential cheating which can be a problem in distance education courses utilizing standard assessments.

**It’s Not About the Technology**

An e-folio can be created using a commercial product like Grady Profile, professional web authoring tools and services, or put together using simple and free tools available for download on the web. More advanced students may create CD-ROM based materials, flashy animations, or professional looking web sites replete with audio and video, but the level of technical sophistication in the product is not important… what’s important is the learning process that goes into creating a portfolio, and the window into a students experience, thoughts, and mastery that the portfolio provides.

**More Resources**

Find more information on utilizing e-folios, including links to papers, examples, and products on our website at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/efolio/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/efolio/). Feel free to contact contact Chris Lott ([chris.lott@uaf.edu](mailto:chris.lott@uaf.edu), 474-5122) at Distance Learning Systems for personalized assistance.
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #14: Resources in Distance Education and Instructional Technology

Just as their students thrive by interacting with other students, instructors benefit from the advice and experience of their peers. In this Teaching Tip we outline some of the online resources we have found valuable in the areas of Distance Education and Instructional Technology. Look for more and updated information on our website, as well as further resources in specific areas, such as instructional design, assessment, and more.

Mailing Lists
- Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS) - http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deos.html

Newsletters and Journals
- Journal of Distance Education - http://cade.athabascau.ca/
- TechKnowLogia - http://www.techknowlogia.org/
- International Center for Distance Learning (iCDL) Journal List - http://www.icdl.open.ac.uk/lit2k/journals.ihtml
- International Review of Open and Distance Learning (IRRODL) - http://www.irrodl.org/
- Distance Education Systemwide Interactive Electronic Newsletter - http://www.uwex.edu/disted/desien/

“Meta” Sites
- Distance-Educator.com - http://www.distance-educator.com/
- Distance Education Clearinghouse - http://www.uwex.edu/disted/home.html
- Educause - http://www.educause.edu/
- American Distance Education Consortium - http://www.adec.edu/
- American Center for the Study of Distance Education (ACSDE) - http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/
- Distance Learning at About.Com - http://distancelearn.about.com/

More Resources
There are plenty more resources where these came from! For more information, check out the DLS website (http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/) or contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/
Migrating information from paper to electronic form—and being able to access those items in their electronic forms—is a regular concern for both instructor and student in any web-enhanced or web-delivered course.

Finding the Right Tools

- **Office Software.** The first and most obvious method is to use an appropriate piece of software, such as a word processor, to create the material and post or send it. Don’t overlook less commonly used features such as drawing tools, equation editors, organization and charting tools, etc.

- **Screen Capture.** A screen capture program allows you to take a quick snap of any image or application on your computer and save that to a file. Free and low-cost programs are available for every platform.

- **Scanner.** A desktop scanner can be used to quickly convert hand-written or hand-drawn notes and diagrams into an electronic image format suitable for viewing across platforms. Adequate desktop scanners are available for less than $60 online or at discount warehouses.

- **Digital Camera.** Digital cameras are becoming a common household accessory, but their potential for workaday applications is often overlooked. A quick picture of a drawing, graph, or whiteboard notes—just to name a few—can make digital transfer a snap.

- **Digitizing Tablet.** For many applications from math equations to artistic applications, a small digitizing tablet, such as those made by Wacom or Aiptek, together with the application of your choice, can simplify the task of capturing hand-drawn materials. These tablets, available for $50-$90 come with applications that allow one to mark-up office applications and PDF documents as well.

- **Mimio and SmartBoard.** If you have access to a Mimio electronic whiteboard or a SmartBoard device located at CRA campuses, these can be used to capture notes, drawings, and screens for redistribution.

- **Fax/Email.** Even venerable fax technology has been affected by new technology. A very useful class of application is the Fax-Email Gateway, such as E-Fax, which accepts fax transmissions and automatically converts them to a digital format ready for reading, markup, or optical character recognition.

Formats and Sizes

Whether sharing or receiving digital files, some preparation and guidelines are necessary to avoid common problems. The most frequently encountered issue is format incompatibility. The recipient must have either the appropriate software or a viewer that can open the file! See this Tip’s resource page for more information.

File size is another important consideration. Unlike their streamlined office document counterparts, scans and digital photos can be extremely large, while mechanisms to reduce their size can demand more sophistication than the end-user might possess. This makes transmission time slower, particularly with slower internet connections, and may result in jammed and over-filled mailboxes! In these cases, the Blackboard Digital Drop-Box may be a better alternative.

More Resources

Find more information on digitizing, including links to software and other products, check out the resources page on our website: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/digitize/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/digitize/). Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.
Every instructor, whether a distance educator or not, faces the issue of promoting and enforcing standards of academic integrity… a concern only highlighted by the distributed student population in a distance course.

**Defining the Problem**

Studies indicate that academic dishonesty is on the rise among high-school and college age students. There’s no evidence that cheating is more common in distance education. Advances in computing technology and the ubiquity of the Internet has reduced the barrier between the impulse to cheat and the actual practice of doing so.

**Coping Strategies**

- **Develop a clear class policy.** Provide a statement to your students that explains the importance of academic integrity and what you expect from them. But don’t stop here! Create an atmosphere of support and trust: outline what you expect from yourself as an instructor, provide access to information about how to use outside resources, and give directions for obtaining help.

- **Utilize Technology.** The Blackboard system allows you to assign password protection and time limits to quizzes and tests which can be automatically created using random selections from large pools of test questions. If you suspect plagiarism you can search for unique phrases with Google or utilize a paper scanning service to check the work automatically against a large number of paper-mills and cheat sites.

- **Change-Up Your Curriculum.** Assign less common readings and ask different questions. Tie your assignments more closely to your individual class materials and discussions. Change your assignments each term. Add your unique perspective to put a “twist” on assignments. This is likely to be more interesting for both you and your students!

- **Focus on Process.** By attaching importance and expectation to process, you can spread the weight of a grade out, taking away much of the motivation for cheating. This can take the form of keeping drafts, copying research materials, having students write up the research process, benchmarking, etc.

- **Rethink Your Assessment Strategy.** Sometimes the “quiz-quiz-test” cycle remains in place out of habit. Take some time to think about exactly what you want your students to learn and what other ways might exist to assess the effectiveness of your instruction. Perhaps portfolios, structured writing assignments, discussion, games, role-playing or other less traditional tools can be of use, leaving traditional tests and quizzes for reinforcement and self-assessment (or for use in proctored situations).

**Positive Effects**

Each of these strategies for dissuading dishonesty is also a potential point for improving the educational experience. While it is important to stand firmly for—and as an example of—academic integrity, the challenge of creating more “cheat resistant” curriculum materials and assessments can help you more clearly identify what is really important to you as an instructor and create a richer and more diverse curriculum for your students.

**More Resources**

Find more information, including a variety of links to papers, studies, and tools for your classroom, check this Tip’s resource page on the Distance Learning Systems website: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/integrity/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/integrity/). Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #17: Web Accessibility Standards and You

In 1998, Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act and—for the first time—set out specific guidelines for accessible web content. In this Teaching Tip we will look at what this legislation says and what it means to you when it comes to web delivery of materials, whether you are using the UAF Blackboard system or not.

Section 508

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (specifically subsection 1194.22) sets standards for web content, specifically sixteen items including such requirements as:

- A text-equivalent for every non-text element (such as images and multimedia)
- Alternatives to information conveyed by color
- Row and column headers for tables
- Proper frame titles and markup

Blackboard

The Blackboard 5 system at UAF—with the exception of the Virtual Classroom chat and whiteboard tool—is compliant with Section 508 guidelines. So if you are using Blackboard you are already on the road to accessibility for your students! But you must also ensure that your own content fulfills the same requirements.

Your Materials

Managing accessibility for your materials means you must a) create and use materials that are accessible, and b) add those items to Blackboard in such a way that you take advantage of its accessibility features.

When creating your materials, you will need to pay attention to a fairly limited number of items you may not have thought about before (or may be unaware of), such as “alt” tags, table headers, descriptive links, etc. Information and examples of each standard requirement geared towards content creators is available online.

When making those materials available on Blackboard, the system provides tools for you to include text alternatives, plug-in download links, and other accessibility items.

This is Important!

If you find something confusing, contact us at Distance Learning Systems and we can help! Issues of accessibility are important not just as matters of compliance with Federal Law, but as a service to our learning community which includes many students and potential students who rely on these standards. There are few worse feelings than having a student excited to take a class only to find themselves unable to do so because we weren’t prepared to follow the relatively simple guidelines established by law.

More Resources

Find more information, including a variety of links and resources, check this Tip’s resource page on the Distance Learning Systems website: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/access/. Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.

1 http://www.section508.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=Content&ID=12#Web
2 http://products.blackboard.com/cp/bb5/access/bb508.cgi
3 http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/1194.22.htm
4 http://products.blackboard.com/cp/bb5/access/508coursebuilders.cgi
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #18: Web Materials That Work

In a recent Teaching Tip¹ we talked about digitizing documents. This week we discuss some of the issues that can arise when making documents available to your students and how to deal with them.

The Right Format
The right format for any document will be that which can be read by all of your students while still presenting the information accurately. Plain text is perhaps the most widely accessible, but you often lose important formatting and layout. Following are points discussing the most useful document types for web education.

HTML/Web Documents
HTML documents will naturally be accessible to all students. You don’t have to be a web developer or know HTML to create HTML documents! Just use the Save As or Save for the Web functions in your software.

PDF Documents
The Adobe PDF format is a widely used and accessible format. As members of the UAF community, you have access to the full Adobe Acrobat program², which lets you create PDF files from applications, web pages, or by scanning existing print documents. PDF documents can be single-page, multi-page³, or even an aggregate of various files⁴ already in PDF format. The important points are to try to keep the file sizes reasonable⁵ and make sure you provide students with a link to the free Acrobat Viewer⁶ in case they don’t yet have it.

Office Documents
Distributing Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel files can be a useful means of exchange as long as your students can view them! Students are not part of the UAF site license for Office. They must understand they will need to own the software, use a lab, or install the appropriate viewer⁷, using links you can provide.

Standard Graphics Files
If you use Photoshop, Corel Draw, or other graphics programs to create materials, be sure to provide the material in an accessible file format. By far, the most accessible will be GIF or JPEG images. If you are targeting other graphics software users, TIFF or PNG are the standards. Try to avoid the less standard BMP, WMF, and PICT platform-specific types. Windows XP and Mac OS X have built-in viewers that can handle most file types, otherwise the free IrfanView⁸ for Windows or MGIV⁹ for Mac OS 9 can open almost any graphic file.

More Resources
Find more information, including a variety of links and resources, file size information, etc., check this Tip’s resource page on the Distance Learning Systems website: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/webmaterials/. Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.

¹ http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/teaching-tips-15.pdf
² http://www.uaf.edu/dcc/keys/
³ http://studio.adobe.com/learn/tips/acr5tagpdf/main.html
⁵ http://studio.adobe.com/learn/tips/acr5smallpdf/main.html
⁶ http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html
⁷ http://www.microsoft.com/office/000/viewers.asp
⁸ http://www.irfanview.com/
⁹ http://www.mgiv.freehomepage.com/about.html
Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #19: Creating an Effective Syllabus

Following up our recent CRA Faculty Development Roundtable1, this week we look at a variety of techniques for creating an engaging, learner-centered, outcomes-based syllabus. Revitalize this important tool! Please take note of the web resources page for this topic, which covers the basic material this list expands upon.

Syllabus Techniques and Concepts From UAF Faculty

**Decision Point** The syllabus is a primary source students use to decide if they are in the right class for their needs and experience. Provide enough information for them to make the right decision.

**Firm Schedule** Although you must balance your approach with flexibility, the syllabus should be a largely unchanging roadmap to guide the students through the entire academic term.

**The Contract** Keep in mind—and reinforce—the idea that the syllabus is a contract between yourself and your students that outlines expectations for both of you.

**Formatting Matters** Particularly in a distance ed course, formatting of materials is important to make materials legible, accessible, and easy to refer to. Page numbers, headings, and colored paper can help.

**Study Questions** Include a few study questions for each class session and have students submit answers in writing (one well-developed paragraph or so) to make up for times they must miss class.

**Library and Resource Information** UAF offers a variety of useful information resources that many students are unaware of. Include pointers for students to library information, the Writing Center, etc.

**Frequently Asked Questions** Try to anticipate common questions and answer them in the body of the syllabus, and perhaps have a section of really common FAQs at the end of the document.

**Humanize and Personalize** Make the syllabus friendly by providing inspiration, quotations, and a personal perspective on the materials.

**Examples and Rubrics** Provide examples of what constitutes satisfactory response, “good” participation, a credit-worthy bulletin board post, whatever kinds of interaction you expect from your students.

**Academic Integrity** A personal statement of academic integrity and why it is important goes further towards establishing a positive environment than boilerplate on this topic from the catalog.

**The Blackboard Syllabus** Make the location of syllabus information clear and unchanging by removing unnecessary buttons and links. Provide it in a readable format online and a printable version. Use the Announcements feature to document changes, but do so wisely so that it remains relevant.

**Defer to Official Policy** Make clear that in case of question or dispute, the relevant official policies in that year’s academic catalog take precedence and are the final arbiter.

**Talk it Over.** Talk about the syllabus, not just in the first class, but by setting some time aside each class period to go over class business details as needed.

More Resources

Find a wealth of material not covered here (including model syllabi from fellow instructors, checklists and templates, and expanded resources, articles, and links), see: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/syllabi/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/syllabi/). Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.

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1 Our thanks to all the Roundtable participants from whom these tips are derived, including: Keith Swarner, Jerah Chadwick, Jodi Bailey, Susan Andrews, John Creed, Anne Millbrooke, Randy Pfeuffer, and Rick Caulfield.
The Portable Document Format (PDF) has rapidly established itself as the standard for cross-platform document exchange for documents with complex formatting or those originating with a print document. Although creating a web (HTML) document is preferable, and a native Word document will usually be smaller than its PDF counterpart, it is not always feasible to create/re-create documents in these formats. For these needs, as well as distributing readable documents from any application, PDF is a sound, accessible solution.

Adobe Acrobat

Reading PDF files demands only the free PDF Reader, but to create them you will need the full Adobe Acrobat program. This software allows you to create PDF files from any file/program on your computer or from paper using a scanner.

Acrobat is available free to UAF faculty and staff as part of the UAF Shared Use Software program. As long as your machine is on the UAF network (which includes most rural campus sites) you can download and use this keyed software. Otherwise you will need to arrange to purchase Acrobat, currently $99 at the UA Tech Center.

Starting with a Digital Document

Adobe Acrobat places handy toolbar buttons in some Office Applications so that you can create a PDF file by clicking a single button and choosing where to save the new version. For applications that are not supported this way, you can create a PDF from any application which can print by sending your document to the special “Acrobat PDFWriter” printer, which will prompt you for a filename and location for the resulting document.

Either way, press a button or choose a menu entry, select a filename and location, hit OK and you are done!

Starting with a Paper Document

If you are beginning with an existing print document, and you don’t have—or want to take—the time to re-create the file, you will need a scanner. Any modern flatbed scanner should work, including models available for $50-$80 from various online vendors, discount warehouses, office supply stores, etc.

Creating the document is simple:

1. Start Adobe Acrobat and choose File > Import > Scan…
2. Select your scanner from the list and choose single-sided format
3. Click the Scan button and Acrobat will start your scanning software
4. If necessary, preview the document, select the area you wish to scan, and choose 150dpi
5. Press Scan. When that page is finished you can either choose to stop or add more pages
6. When you stop adding pages, use File > Save to save your new PDF document

More Resources

For more information on creating PDF file, including examples of file output and sizes based on scanning, Microsoft Word, and graphics files, see the resource page: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/pdf/. Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.
Email communication is de rigueur in today’s environment, providing a welcome opportunity for interaction in almost any course. But the sometimes massive email traffic associated with a course can also leave one feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to respond adequately. In this Teaching Tip we look at some coping strategies.

Learn Your Client

Obtain and learn a capable, modern email client such as Netscape/Mozilla Mail, Outlook Express, or Eudora. Webmail is a fine supplement while traveling or for quick access from someone else’s computer, but it is not a substitute for a good desktop which will have features useful for dealing with large volumes of email.

Get Connected Properly

Many instructors are still using venerable POP3 technology which downloads email to the user’s computer for processing. IMAP is a newer, faster technology allowing you to access and store your mail on the remote system. This provides the considerable advantage that all of your email is accessible from anywhere. No more messages lost “somewhere else” when you need them! Almost any modern email client can be configured to utilize IMAP.

Getting Organized

Organizing your email is a fundamental management strategy.

- **Folders.** Folders should be used to separate email into manageable groups. You can manually sort messages each day (taking this opportunity to send a simple acknowledgement) into folders—typically one for each class—or you can automatically sort mail into folders using filters and/or Procmail.

- **Accounts.** Using multiple accounts is highly recommended. On the Aurora system you can obtain a separate account for each class. Make sure to direct students to the right account for their class, promising—and follow through on providing—good response times for email sent to the right place.

Expectation, Acknowledgement, and Response

Expectation is a powerful and unpredictable force. You must make clear to your students what they can expect from you in terms of response time. They should know that instant responses might sometimes occur serendipitously, but not all the time. A predictable two day turnaround time is more valuable to your students than an unpredictable time that varies between one-hour at some times and four or more days at others.

You can immediately provide an acknowledgement that their email has been received (this can be partially automated using a template or fully automated if you are using separate email accounts). This will prevent confusion (and traffic) over whether a message was received at all, particularly if you have a delayed response.

Finally, when the time comes, provide an adequate answer, including reference to the original message. You don’t have to be profound, but you should clearly and directly communicate. Be opportunistic and take advantage of this contact to personally engage the student, reassuring them of your presence and willingness to assist them, and providing relevant contact, web address, and other information in your signature.

More Resources

For more information, tips, and tricks with dealing with class email, large volumes of email, and handling unsolicited commercial email, see this Tip’s resource page: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/email/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/email/). Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.
Classroom assessment (CA)—the study of what your students are learning and how effectively you are teaching them—is no less pertinent to the distance educator than the face-to-face instructor. No one should wait until a final exam to discover the result of problems when techniques exist to help you discover potential problems and correct them mid-course as well as reveal those things that are working exceedingly well.

**The Assumptions of Assessment**

Classroom assessment is based on seven assumptions:

1. The quality of student learning is directly, although not exclusively, related to the quality of teaching. Therefore, one of the most promising ways to improve learning is to improve teaching.
2. To improve effectiveness, teachers need first to make their goals and objectives explicit and then to get specific, comprehensible feedback on the extent to which they are achieving those goals and objectives.
3. To improve their learning, students need to receive appropriate and focused feedback early and often; they also need to learn how to assess their own learning.
4. The assessment most likely to improve teaching and learning is that conducted by faculty to answer questions they themselves have formulated.
5. Systematic inquiry and intellectual challenge are powerful sources of motivation, growth, and renewal for teachers, and CA can provide that challenge.
6. CA does not require specialized training and can be carried out by teachers from all disciplines.
7. Collaborating with colleagues and students in CA enhances learning and personal satisfaction for all.

**Methods of Assessment**

There are many techniques of classroom assessment, both ongoing and summative. Here are just a few that are particularly suitable for distance education activities:

- **The Background Probe** adapts the informal gathering of background information about a student’s preparation for the course, background, and expectations that happens in a traditional classroom to the distance setting. This can be done as a written survey, email, or using an assessment tool.
- **Unit Reflection** asks the student to provide concise documentation relating to an assignment or other activity. A short paragraph or two that elaborates on their approach, what they learned, and unanswered questions helps students clarify their thinking while helping an instructor refine her approach.
- **One Minute Email** asks a student to take one minute to send an email to the instructor in which they either answer the basic questions “what is the most important thing you learned?” and “what important question remains unanswered” or responds to basic prompts such as: “I’m most satisfied with, I’m having problems with, I wonder about, etc.”
- **The One Sentence Summary** asks students to summarize a learning unit in one long, grammatical sentence, generally using the "Who does what to whom, when, where, how, and why?” structure.

**More Resources**

For more CA techniques and information, resources, and web links on the topic of classroom assessment, see this tip’s resource page at: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/ca/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/ca/). Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.

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Distance Learning Systems
Teaching Tip #23: A Blackboard Scavenger Hunt

The Blackboard Learning Management system can be a valuable addition to just about any class, but to be effective students must know how to use it! Take some of the drudgery out of the process by allowing your students to discover by doing—in this case by utilizing a simple, but effective, Blackboard Scavenger Hunt.

Learning Objectives

Students familiarize themselves with the following primary Blackboard tools/areas:

- Announcements
- Course Information area
- Course Documents (content) area
- Discussion Boards
- Assessments

Students demonstrate their mastery by completing a brief Blackboard assessment.

Format/Process

1. Place the “items” in the appropriate locations in your Blackboard course in various formats (items may be part of regular class materials or special items posted just for the Scavenger Hunt) for example:
   - in a Blackboard Announcement
   - in a document in the Course Information area
   - in a folder within the course documents section
   - in the class syllabus
   - in a discussion board posting
   - in a document passed to the student using the Digital Drop Box

2. Create a short, point-bearing Blackboard quiz asking for the items they found and make it available.

3. Create a handout (paper, Word, PDF, or text) outlining the Scavenger Hunt items, tips on locations, and a place to note answers. Don’t forget to indicate where they go in your course to take the quiz.

4. Provide the handout to students as early as possible in the semester, preferably before asking students to use Blackboard to access course curriculum. Finally, students will complete a short, graded, point-bearing Blackboard quiz using the items they have found.

Examples

The key to successful Scavenger Hunt is to make the items being sought fun and/or relevant to the curriculum. For example, UAA faculty have devised an exercise in which the students are seeking end words for an amusing limerick. You could similarly have students finding parts of a theorem, the names of authors, quotations, medical terms, chemical scientific names, or other kinds of information might be relevant to your class.

More Resources

For more information on Blackboard use and training, check out the CAT Blackboard site (http://cat.uaf.edu/blackboard.php) and the DLS Blackboard Resources page (http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/tech/internet/bb/). Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations regarding implementing Blackboard with your curriculum.

1 http://uaonline.alaska.edu/faculty/courseDev/orientation/scavenger.html

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/
Many courses have a significant writing component. Ensuring effective interaction with student writers has evolved into a common process-oriented approach integrating pre-writing activities, drafting, and feedback cycles. Implementing process writing in distance education courses often involves paper mail and fax, but using Blackboard and a modern word processor enables a new environment for these venerable techniques.

**Blackboard Discussion Boards and Groups**

Blackboard discussion forums provide a convenient place to interact with students and—optionally—allow students to interact with each other. Traditional discussion boards available to the whole class can be used to post and exchange documents. However, even with permission from participants, not all interactions involved in process writing are suitable for public display. Exchange of complete revisions and the accompanying comments is often a private matter between the student, instructor, and perhaps a small peer-editing group.

The Groups feature of Blackboard can be used to create a private collaboration space limited to the proper individuals. Each group space can have its own discussion boards and drop-box, providing a forum for private exchange and discussion. Due to the nature of the Blackboard system, the instructor will need to create a group for each student that includes at least them and the student they are working with. And don’t forget to check in!

**Word Processors and Revision Tracking**

UAF has standardized on the Microsoft Office suite, making it available to all staff and faculty for home and office. Microsoft Word has a full-featured revision tracking feature which allows users to make (and annotate) changes which can then be reviewed and applied. This is an excellent method for maintaining the revision cycle in a process writing environment. The student can provide her instructor with a paper in electronic form which can be revised/annotated and returned for the student to view/review. Discussion of the revision can be contextualized within a Blackboard discussion forum or using a synchronous class component such as Horizon Live or audioconference.

Although many students do have Microsoft Word, they are not part of the site licensing agreement at UAF—and it is a relatively expensive piece of software. However, for most documents the completely free Open Office\(^1\) suite includes a word processor with revision tracking features that can open and save files in Microsoft Word format, making this kind of interaction possible for anyone without extra cost.

**Acrobat Revisions and Comments**

Another option for handling the mechanical side of the revision process is to use Adobe Acrobat, which is free for faculty and staff to use on the University network through Shared Use Licensing\(^2\). The full version is needed to perform visual markup, annotations, and comments. Students only need the free Acrobat Reader\(^3\) to view the revisions and comments based on the markup from a PDF file the instructor can create from any standard or importable word processing format.

**More Resources**

Find more resources on implementing process writing in your teaching environment at this tip’s resource page: http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/process/. Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.

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\(^1\) http://www.openoffice.org/
\(^2\) http://www.uaf.edu/dcc/keys/index.html
\(^3\) http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html

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Creating a community of learning in your classroom is a vital way to enhance engagement and retention. With a new semester underway, the reality of the labor involved in maintaining an online presence can be daunting. But there are tools that can provide an immediate effect without consuming too much precious prep time!

**Blackboard Resources**

Even if you teach a class that has synchronous sessions via audio or web conferencing, you should consider using Blackboard. We strongly recommend that you have a Blackboard presence for all of your classes, if only for the gradebook (students are overwhelmingly positive about the real-time gradebook and since you need to maintain a gradebook anyway, why not do it in Blackboard and have it automatically available to students to view their own grades?) and as a place to make handouts and other static materials available outside of class time. When your students are in Blackboard—which is easier now than ever thanks to the new automatic enrollments—there are a number of easy to use tools for fostering a sense of class community.

**Personal Homepages**

Each student in Blackboard has a “homepage” with a picture and favorite web links they can create using simple web forms. By using the Class Roster students can view any other student’s homepage, helping students connect and feel less isolated. We’ve had particularly good luck providing links to each student’s page in a course content area. Homepages can also be used as the basis for a discussion assignment, in-class or electronically.

**Discussion Boards**

Blackboard discussion boards allow students to post messages as part of an asynchronous conversation. We have had good luck a) providing topical “discussion starters” to which students must respond, b) using the forums as a place for students to report on the results of basic research, c) creating contextual, current discussion around relevant “real world” events and news, and d) as a space for public “reflective” exercises. You can stimulate even more use by having an exercise which requires students to reflect on earlier posts.

**Lightweight (Text) Chat**

The Collaboration area of Blackboard provides a simple real-time text chat that works with any modern browser. This is not only useful for office hours, but as a potential place to engage in informal “hallway” discussions with students, as well as an area for student-to-student communication. The text chat is easy to set up and easy to use!

**Email Lists and Groups**

Good old-fashioned email lists use one address for all participants to send email to all, and are still a powerful means of communication. Yahoo Groups¹ and Topica² are popular services for creating and maintaining free email lists with options for web archives and posting. An email list can easily increase your interaction with students and facilitate asynchronous discussion, which in turn enhances engagement. The primary potential problem with email is the increased traffic coming to your (and students’) sometimes already overloaded inbox!

**More Resources**

Find more resources on creating classroom community at this tip’s resource page: [http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/simple-community/](http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/simple-community/). Feel free to contact Chris Lott (chris.lott@uaf.edu, 474-5122) for personalized assistance and recommendations.

¹ [http://groups.yahoo.com](http://groups.yahoo.com)

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