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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the experiences and the research of two communication instructors who are currently using Blackboard CourseInfo, an online software program, to enhance learning and communication. The paper states that ,in 1999, Ohio University made Blackboard CourseInfo available to its faculty to enable instructors to have the option of creating and teaching entire courses online or in using online components as supplements to on-site instruction. The paper provides an overview of Blackboard CourseInfo and its use to support active learning, and it presents survey findings from the first year experience of using Blackboard CourseInfo as a course component. The paper concludes with suggestions for engaging students online and enhancing communication between teachers and students. An appendix provides a student handout "CourseInfo blackboard.com Menu." (EF)

Engaging the Students—Online

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Engaging the Students—Online

Numerous teaching/learning theorists and educators stress the importance of engaging students in active learning. However, many educators believe that active learning requires on-site interaction between teachers and students. There is a myth that participants must share the same physical space in order for dialogue and learning to occur.

In 1999, Ohio University made available to its faculty on-line computer software that enables instructors to have the option of creating and teaching entire courses on-line or in using on-line components as supplements to on-site instruction. This paper focuses on the experiences and the research of two communication instructors who are currently using Blackboard CourseInfo, an online software, to enhance learning and communication. In this paper, we will provide an overview of Blackboard CourseInfo and how it is used to support active learning. Survey findings from the first year experience of using Blackboard CourseInfo as course components for communication courses at Ohio University-Athens and Ohio University-Southern Campus will be presented.

Blackboard CourseInfo

This online software provides a teaching and learning environment that can be used as an educational supplement in the on-site classroom or as the sole method for teaching classes at a distance. Over 3,300 institutions in over 70 countries currently use Blackboard CourseInfo (www.blackboard.com). Convenient buttons provide students with course links for access to various sections of information: *Announcements, Course Information, Staff Information, Course Documents, Assignments, Communication, External Links, and Student Tools*. Accessing information is as easy as pointing and clicking in this user-friendly environment. (See Figure 1.)

Course management is simple—faculty are not required to have knowledge of html in order to post new information to the site. Information can be created in Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint and this information can be easily uploaded through the use of the site's *Control Panel*. Audio and video clips can also be uploaded to enhance the variety of information that is available for students to examine. Among the many functions located within the instructor's *Control Panel* are options that permit the instructor to customize the look of the site, enable or disable information or documents for student access, track and report course statistics of student use, provide immediate feedback to online tests, and offer students access to their grades via an online gradebook. Instructors have a variety of options for utilizing Blackboard.

Although there are numerous online software packages that offer similar functions that have been used as course supplements or as the primary mode for distance education (i.e., LearningSpace, Web Course in a Box, WebCT, and WebMentor), this paper does not offer a comparison nor endorses one product over another. Ann Kovalchick, Ohio University's director for the Center of Innovations in Technology for Learning (CITL), indicated that several software were examined and Blackboard was chosen for O.U. on the basis of instructor's ease of use and cost.

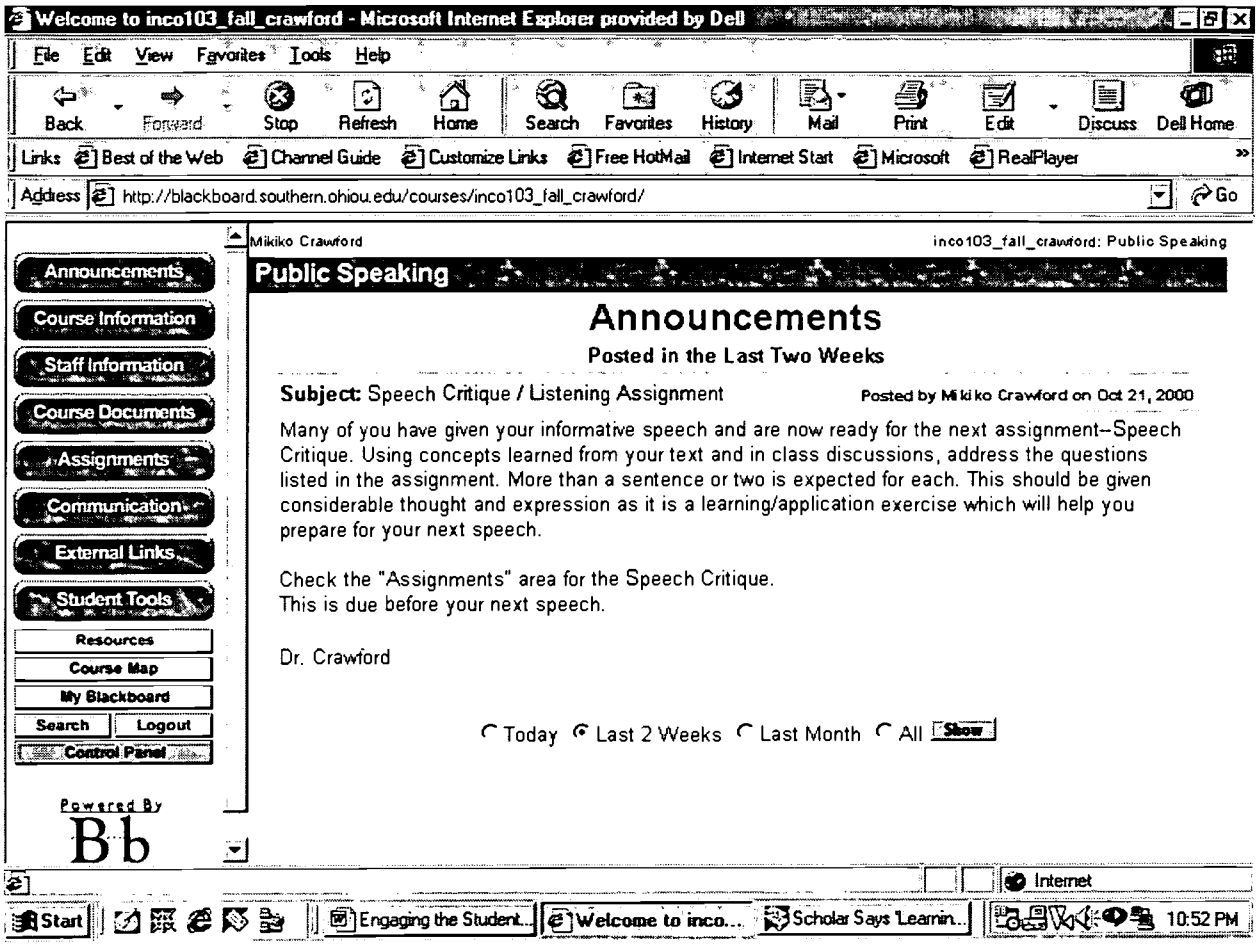

Figure 1. Screen shot of Blackboard CourseInfo: Public Speaking Course.

Engaging Students using Blackboard and The Seven Principles

The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Chickering and Gamson, 1991) has often served as a reference for educators who desire to improve their teaching skills. The authors identify practices, policies, and institutional conditions that have resulted in improved undergraduate education. These research-based principles have been discussed and implemented to motivate reform in undergraduate education (Sorcinelli, 1995). While it may be assumed that these principles are designed for the traditional on-site classroom, they can be applied to online course components to promote active learning as well.

> "Because so much research indicates that these practices support better learning, it would be significant to discover that they were being implemented and that technology was playing an important role. By the same token, these objectives are mentioned so often by technology-using educators (especially the first five) that it would be significant to discover that an institution investing heavily in technology was not implementing these principles." (Erhmann, 1997, p. 3)

1. Student-Faculty Contact. "Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of class is a most important factor in student motivation and involvement" (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996,

p. 1). The *Communication* link on Blackboard CourseInfo enables students to send email to the instructor, to group members, or to one or all class members. This offers another mode for communication. Email may enable a reluctant student to ask questions or discuss personal concerns that he or she otherwise would refrain from doing in the traditional classroom. Blackboard also provides a *Discussion Board* that allows students to post threaded discussions and respond to topics posted by the instructor. This feature creates an opportunity for students to read and respond to one another's comments in an environment that is much more relaxed to some. This may be particularly beneficial for the student who experiences communication apprehension in the traditional classroom and refrains from commenting or questioning in class. The *Student Tools* section provides a *Drop Box* where students can upload documents and send them to the instructor for feedback. These functions promote student-faculty communication by eliminating "telephone tag," offering another mode for students to have access to faculty members, and providing the opportunity to share information and documents between class members.

2. Cooperation Among Students. Cooperative learning is defined as the active involvement of students, often in small groups. "Working with others often increases involvement in learning" (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, p. 3). Blackboard CourseInfo enables instructors to place students into groups with a separate online space of their own where they may discuss topics or projects. Through the *Communication* link there is a *Group Page* option that provides email addresses of group's members, enables group members to engage in threaded discussions, and provides a chat room exclusively for members of that group. "Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated" (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996, p. 2). With the increase of non-traditional students who have outside responsibilities such as families and jobs, this provides more opportunities for interaction outside the classroom. Students can become more actively involved in group collaboration by having anytime and anywhere access to their group members.

3. Active Learning. "Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers" (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996, p. 2). Blackboard CourseInfo empowers students to be involved in more than listening as a form of learning; they become responsible for information and discussions posted online. There they are engaged in reading, writing, and discussing, all which often involve a higher-order of thinking, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These active learning processes are available throughout Blackboard CourseInfo. Instructors may require students to access *External Links* for current information on a particular topic that is not covered in the lecture or text, students may be graded for their participation in online discussions, or they may be required to critique an assignment that is sent from the instructor via the *Dropbox*. Each of these learning opportunities requires that students take an active role in seeking out information, and this empowers them in becoming responsible for learning.

4. Prompt Feedback. "Students need prompt feedback on performance to benefit from courses" (Sorcinelli, 1995, p. 371). The online gradebook feature enables students to obtain their grades before the next class session. By clicking on the *Student Tools* link, students are presented with an icon that accesses *Check Your Grade*. Each student's personal information is protected by the password and user identification, which is required for access to the site. When tests and quizzes are given online, students are provided with immediate feedback on which items were correct. Instructors can submit additional information, such as explanations regarding correct or

incorrect answers if so desired. Instructors also have the option of providing students with feedback via the *Drop Box*. This feature enables instructors to return electronically submitted papers via the same mode. Feedback can also be provided via email to students. In both cases, this eliminates the waiting time typically encountered by students who wonder until the next class meeting about their performance on an assignment.

5. Time on Task. A correlation has been established between the effective use of class time and the overall rating of course, instructor, and amount of learning (Sorcinelli, 1995). Instructors can post course documents and additional readings for students to download, provide individual feedback/comments, and post examples and supplements online, thus saving on-site class time for course content and activities. "Teaching strategies that help students learn at home or work can save hours otherwise spent commuting to and from campus, finding parking places, and so on" (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996, p. 3).

6. High Expectations. "Expect more and you will get it. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996, p. 4). When instructors set high, yet attainable goals, academic achievement usually increases. These expectations can be reinforced on Blackboard CourseInfo through: the posting of *Announcements* and letting students know that they are expected to access these postings on a frequent basis to remain updated about the class; posting *Course Documents* such as the syllabi and supplemental handouts or readings for students to access; creating *Assignments* which require students to go on-line to complete; and encouraging students to engage in on-line discussions in the *Chat Room* which encourages an environment of peer feedback—the threaded discussions can also elicit student input on assignments that can affect the motivation of other students.

7. Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning. "Faculty who show regard for their students' unique interests and talents are likely to facilitate student growth and development in every sphere—academic, social, personal, and vocations" (Sorcinelli, 1995, p. 373). Blackboard CourseInfo provides other means for enhancing course lectures, many which have already been noted. Its ability to accommodate different learning styles, such as presenting visuals via the use of PowerPoint and other graphics, can facilitate learning. Allowing students to chose topics of interest and creative ways of disseminating information that is learned promotes motivation and learning. These types of completed assignments can often be posted on Blackboard. Links to other web sites may provide additional means for various learning styles.

In addition to the seven principles discussed above, there has been an expressed concern that on-line classes lack the interpersonal dimension which scholars have identified as being beneficial for student learning and motivation (i.e., immediacy). Blackboard CourseInfo provides faculty and students with a variety of ways to create interpersonal relationships at a distance. White and Weight (2000) emphasize that online instructors need to communicate with each student so that he/she feels unique. They suggest using students' names in all correspondence and encouraging students to upload a brief biography at the beginning of the term. Blackboard provides the option for students to upload a photograph and post personal information by creating their own *Student Pages*. Faculty can also eliminate the mystery of their identity by posting a picture and personal information. This information is located in the *Staff Information* section of the site.

Survey Tool

In order to assess the impact of Blackboard CourseInfo, a survey was constructed by Ohio University's Center for Innovations in Technology for Learning (CITL) to specifically explore the perceptions of students in the university's first quarter of using Blackboard CourseInfo (Kovalchick, 2000). Questions included on the survey were designed to assess student perceptions of learning and satisfaction as a result of integrating the technology as part of the class requirements.

This survey was administered to students in lower and upper level communication courses including: Fundamentals of Communications (INCO 101) and Public Speaking (INCO 103) at a regional campus (OU-Southern), and Senior Practicum in Organizational Communication (INCO 445) at the main campus (OU-Athens).

Students' Perceptions of Online Components

The following statements were issued at the beginning of this survey section. "In your opinion, to what extent were each of the following given **priority** in this course. **Please rate each of the following from 1 to 5:**" (CITL, 1999).

Athens Campus Results. The Athens Campus is mainly comprised of traditional college students. Below are the percentages of student responses to the five items listed in the teaching and learning portion of the CITL survey.

Table 1. Teaching and Learning

Item	Percentages				
Encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning	0	0	13	34.8	52.2
Structuring the course so that students don't waste time in non-course activities (such as standing in line, commuting, etc.)	13	17.4	26.1	26.1	17.4
Building student confidence in their ability to learn difficult subject matter	0	8.7	26.1	39.1	26.1
Enabling students to work through course materials at their own pace	4.3	8.7	17.4	34.8	34.8
Enabling students to complete tasks at times that are convenient for them	8.7	0	30.4	17.4	43.5
N = 23	1	2	3	4	5

1 = lowest priority
2 = somewhat low priority
3 = normal
4 = somewhat high priority
5 = highest priority

Southern Campus Results. The Southern Campus is located in Ironton, Ohio and is a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students. These students were given anonymity in submitting the survey. Percentages of their responses are listed below.

Table 2. Teaching and Learning

Item	Percentages				
Encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning	1.8	0	23.6	34.5	38.2
Structuring the course so that students don't waste time in non-course activities (such as standing in line, commuting, etc.)	1.8	1.8	38.2	30.9	23.6
Building student confidence in their ability to learn difficult subject matter	1.8	0	25.5	43.6	25.5
Enabling students to work through course materials at their own pace	5.5	5.5	29.1	36.4	20.0
Enabling students to complete tasks at times that are convenient for them	5.5	14.5	20.0	27.3	29.1
N = 55	1	2	3	4	5

1 = lowest priority
2 = somewhat low priority
3 = normal
4 = somewhat high priority
5 = highest priority

Students' Perceptions of Learning and Technology

The following statements were issued at the beginning of this section. "Please indicate how strongly you **agree** or **disagree** with each of the following statements: **Because of the way this course uses Electronic Communication**:" (CITL, 1999). Please note that the positive and negative responses are reversed from the previous survey section.

Table 3. Learning and Technology Athens Campus Results.

Item	Percentages				
I miss important information because the technology doesn't work correctly.	26.1	65.2	60.9	0	0
I am better able to juggle my course work with my work and/or home responsibilities.	13.0	65.2	0	8.7	13.0
I am more confident that I can reach my academic goals.	0	65.2	0	8.7	0
I spend more time studying.	0	39.1	43.5	8.7	8.7
I put more thought into my comments.	13.0	65.2	17.4	4.3	0
I feel more comfortable asking an awkward question.	0	43.5	34.8	13.0	8.7
It is difficult to relate to the other students in this course.	0	0	56.5	34.8	8.7
I put in less time traveling to and from the campus/course delivery site.	4.3	17.4	34.8	26.1	17.4
I don't receive responses to my comments.	4.3	13.0	56.5	21.7	4.3
I was able to take this course.	13.0	52.2	8.7	8.7	17.4
I am better able to understand the ideas and concepts taught in this course.	4.3	56.5	21.7	8.7	8.7
I am better able to visualize the ideas and concepts taught in this course.	4.3	52.2	30.4	4.3	8.7
CourseInfo used in this course was appropriate for performing file exchanges required.	34.8	56.5	4.3	0	4.3
It was easy to access the course information using a web browser.	34.8	47.8	8.7	4.3	4.3
The instructor gave enough information to use the CourseInfo.	30.4	56.5	4.3	0	8.7
I would recommend this course and instructor to others.	39.1	43.5	8.7	8.7	0
N = 23	1	2	3	4	5

1 = strongly agree
2 = agree
3. = disagree
4. = strongly disagree
5. = not applicable

Table 4. Learning and Technology Southern Campus Results.

Item	Percentages				
I miss important information because the technology doesn't work correctly.	3.6	10.9	49.1	25.5	10.9
I am better able to juggle my course work with my work and/or home responsibilities.	18.2	41.8	16.4	14.5	9.1
I am more confident that I can reach my academic goals.	20.0	41.8	21.8	5.5	10.9
I spend more time studying.	9.1	29.1	38.2	12.7	10.9
I put more thought into my comments.	21.8	43.6	21.8	3.6	9.1
I feel more comfortable asking an awkward question.	23.6	29.1	29.1	9.1	9.1
It is difficult to relate to the other students in this course.	1.8	1.8	56.4	30.9	5.5
I put in less time traveling to and from the campus/course delivery site.	10.9	27.3	23.6	18.2	18.2
I don't receive responses to my comments.	1.8	1.8	54.5	16.4	25.0
I was able to take this course.	29.1	38.2	7.3	0	23.6
I am better able to understand the ideas and concepts taught in this course.	20.0	54.5	9.1	7.3	7.3
I am better able to visualize the ideas and concepts taught in this course.	16.4	54.5	9.1	7.3	9.1
CourseInfo used in this course was appropriate for performing file exchanges required.	14.5	47.3	7.3	5.5	10.9
It was easy to access the course information using a web browser.	25.5	45.5	12.7	5.5	10.9
The instructor gave enough information to use the CourseInfo.	34.5	45.5	1.8	3.6	12.7
I would recommend this course and instructor to others.	40.0	45.5	5.5	3.6	5.5
N = 55	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

1 = strongly agree
2 = agree
3. = disagree
4. = strongly disagree
5. = not applicable

Summary of Survey Results

Overall, results of this survey of the pilot quarter of CourseInfo yielded some interesting findings. Most notable is the fact that there appears to be evidence that *The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (Chickering and Gamson, 1991) are indeed

accomplished through the integration of technology in the classroom. A summary of the survey results includes:

- Students viewed the goal of empowering students for their own learning to be a priority in the courses using Blackboard.com. Thus, the sixth principle of "High Expectations" is achieved.
- "Time on Task" is evidenced through students' perceptions that priority was given to structuring the course so that students didn't waste time in non-course activities.
- Students reported the goal of building student confidence in their ability to learn difficult subject matter was a priority in the courses using Blackboard.com. This fulfills the principle of establishing "High Expectations" for students, and thus building confidence in their own ability to learn. Additional responses indicated that students agreed that the use of the technology enhanced their own confidence for achieving their academic goals.
- Students indicated that they generally put more thought into their comments as a result of using the technology in the classroom. This may indicate more "Active Learning" on the part of students. One of the classes in which students were surveyed required them to participate in on-line discussions each week. This requirement may have resulted in more student participation than they would engage in the traditional on-site classroom.
- Students reported that they generally disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the technology made it difficult to relate to other students in the course. Thus, the principle of "Cooperation Among Students" is supported, and the myth that technology removes the ability to engage in interpersonal interactions appears to be refuted.
- Students perceived the technology as enhancing their ability to understand concepts and ideas presented in the course. The majority of them also felt that they were better able to visualize the ideas and concepts taught in this course. Thus, the principles of "Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning" and "Active Learning" appear to be addressed. The technology may have provided students with new ways of looking at information that they might not otherwise have attempted in an on-site environment.

Future Plans for Engaging Students

Finding time to learn how to use online software, translate the use into specific course content, create an online site, maintain that site, and manage the additional interaction with students is indeed a juggling act. In the beginning, juggling these demands is a new learning experience for instructors, and one that is often balanced through trial and error. After gaining the experience of teaching courses with online components, we offer the following suggestions for engaging students online and enhancing the communication between teachers and students:

- ***Ask yourself what keeps students from using online components.*** Address the issues and try to determine ways to overcome the student barriers. One suggestion is to conduct a "technology evaluation" at various points during the quarter to identify the questions students have regarding the technology. CourseInfo offers instructors the option of tracking *Course Statistics*, which provides information on the number of times that individual students have accessed the course site. Use this information to identify potential students who may not be comfortable using the site.
- ***Provide students with a detailed orientation session on using the technology, and dedicate class time to demonstrate online components.*** If possible conduct a class session in the computer lab where students can gain hands-on experience. Some students may experience technology apprehension. Providing them with hands-on practice of

login procedures, uploading and downloading information, and other features of the course site may alleviate some of the apprehension and alter their attitudes toward using the site. Take advantage of peer learning during this time. This can support active learning, cooperation among students, prompt feedback and diverse talents and ways of learning. Instructors may also want to provide students with printed handouts that offer guidelines for using the class website (See Appendix A).

- ***Provide class time and computer usage for initial group meetings.*** Set aside class time for groups to practice using the *Group Pages* features on CourseInfo. One suggestion for an exercise to engage students is to provide the group with a problem which must be solved collaboratively and give each member of the group a part of the information necessary for solving the problem. Assign them the task of using the group chat room to share the information that they have and solve the problem. Experienced computer users can help those who are less experienced. This time can facilitate the forming stage of the groups.
- ***Ask yourself why students may be hesitant to communicate or participate.*** Provide alternative means for participation. Students who are fearful of asking questions in class may feel more open communicating via computer than in a face-to-face setting. Students may feel limited by available in-class time to interact. Online communication can provide additional time and space that is more convenient to a student's needs for interacting with the instructor. This also allows students more time for constructing conversation.
- ***Schedule online office hours using the Virtual Classroom (chatroom) as a meeting place.*** While placing a phone call may appear more practical, the *Virtual Classroom* allows several students to meet and discuss with the instructor at the same time. This also provides students with the experience of another mode of communication using technology.
- ***Moderate the Discussion Board.*** The first student who responds to a post may limit their remarks to a specific area and others may follow their lead—much like sheep going down a path. Discussion often needs to be moderated with open-ended questions to promote diverse thinking while keeping students focused on the topic.
- ***Allow students to edit their remarks and to post anonymously on the Discussion Board.*** Being able to edit remarks enables students to possess control of their comments. Students may find it easier to express thoughts contrary to popular opinion when given the option to post anonymously and discussion can become more insightful and meaningful to students. This then becomes another reason for the instructor to moderate the *Discussion Board.*
- ***Ask yourself how online components can enhance learning.*** Most learning occurs outside the classroom. Provide supplements to class content that guide students through the course objectives and strive to use methods or modes that address various learning styles.
- ***Post examples of excellent student work online.*** Examples of topics, content, formatting, creativity, and style can be beneficial to students who seek more guidance with assignments. Posting good examples of students' work can be rewarding to those students while providing a reference to other students. This can be informative, motivational and establish high expectations.
- ***Post online practice quizzes with feedback.*** This provides students with a sample of what to expect on tests and can be used as a means for study. Feedback to correct and incorrect

test answers can further the students' knowledge and help them develop better test taking skills.

- ***Keep External Links current and involve students in selection***. Check links to ensure that these are still working sites since sites and information can quickly come and go. Ask students to submit any links that they may find useful – consider offering students class points for their contributions to the external links!

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APPENDIX CourseInfo blackboard.com handout distributed to students.

CourseInfo blackboard.com
MENU

ANNOUNCEMENTS
Check here daily for updated information about INCO 445!

COURSE INFORMATION
Syllabus
Course Calendar
Assignment Descriptions
Grading Scale
Sample Final Project Poster Displays

STAFF INFORMATION
Info about Dr. Candice Thomas-Maddox

COURSE DOCUMENTS
Lecture Notes
Chapter Outlines
PowerPoint Slides
Study Guides
Sample Essay Exams
Grading Criteria for Projects

ASSIGNMENTS
Sample Multiple Choice Exams
Class Assignments

COMMUNICATION
SEND EMAIL
Send email messages to one or all of your classmates and to Candice!
STUDENT ROSTER
STUDENT PAGE
Visit the webpages of your classmates!
DISCUSSION BOARD
Post your responses to messages left by Candice or your classmates
VIRTUAL CHAT
GROUP PAGES
Project groups can conduct work on-line here

EXTERNAL LINKS
Click on these links for additional information on the Internet to accompany concepts and theories in Organizational Communication

STUDENT TOOLS

STUDENT DROPBOX

Here is where you will send assignments to Candice

1. Scroll down to the box "File to Upload"
2. Click on "BROWSE"
3. Click on the drive location where your file is saved
4. Double-click on the file name – the file name should appear in the box "FILE TO UPLOAD"
5. Create a name for your file in the box "LINK TO FILE". (I.e., Assignment #1, Group #2 Final Project Proposal)
6. Click on "SEND FILE TO INSTRUCTOR"
7. You should receive a "file sent" confirmation message on your screen. If you do not see this message, repeat the above steps.

CHANGE YOUR INFORMATION

Change your personal information and password here!

CHECK YOUR GRADE

Grades will be posted within 48 hours of submitting the assignment to Dr. Thomas-Maddox. Be sure to check your grades often and notify Dr. Thomas-Maddox of any discrepancies!!!

EDIT YOUR HOMEPAGE

Go here to create your homepage that will be posted in the "COMMUNICATION" section of the website under "STUDENT PAGES".

STUDENT CALENDAR

Use this feature to keep organized! In addition to your own personal calendar, you can also check out important University dates as well as any important dates for INCO 445!

STUDENT MANUAL

This is an on-line manual for blackboard.com. You can refer to it when you have difficulty using CourseInfo–blackboard.com!

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