
The Independent Institute of Education

Enabling Faculty to Create Consistent Teaching and Learning Experiences Across Twenty-three Campuses and Online



Blackboard

As the global leader in online learning, Blackboard aims to empower education institutions to have access to the best tools and professional development to provide world-class teaching and learning experiences. Through the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series, academic staff are equipped to deliver high quality teaching and learning using technology. Through the certification program, education institutions can comply with institution standards for teaching, increase the investment value of their learning technology, provide a consistent pedagogy delivery using technology, and have confidence in their academic staff's teaching and learning approach. The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE), one of the leading private higher education institutions in South Africa, sought to not only train academic staff members on the use of their LMS, Blackboard Learn, but to also provide teaching professional development on how to facilitate effective learning experiences using online learning.

The Opportunity at a Glance

Challenge: Due to the nature of The Independent Institute of Education's academic model, one in which all of their qualifications are centrally accredited and registered, all learning materials and assessments are developed centrally and then rolled out and offered at their various brands (IIE Rosebank College, IIE Varsity College, IIE Vega School and The IIE MSA). The institute needed an intervention where lecturers were not only trained in the use of their LMS, Blackboard Learn, but also in the proper facilitation of learning through the online platform, so both they and their students would benefit optimally from the learning experiences that have been prepared for them.

Solution: Due to the flexible nature of the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series, The IIE could sign up faculty members, lecturers, as well as support staff across brands and campuses to become certified. Also beneficial was the mode of delivery of the program, which is closely aligned with one of the institute's modes of delivery they cater for in the design of their courses.

Results: Since 2017, when The IIE first rolled out the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning series, about 145 participants in various cohorts have completed one or more of the courses (three in total to gain full certification), and about 50% of them are teaching. Both academic and support staff reported that experiencing a blended mode of delivery themselves has added enormous value in their understanding of the concept and their roles therein. The majority of academic staff acknowledged that they have a much better understanding of and appreciation for the courses they have to teach, which have already been developed for them on Blackboard Learn.

Bridging the Gap Between the LMS and World-Class Teaching and Learning Facilitation

Challenge

Hermien Geldenhuys, Senior Instructional Designer in the Central Academic Team at The IIE, explains that since the introduction of Learning Management Systems to the South African Tertiary Education landscape in the early 1990s, these were acquired by education institutions and established as a space



where lecturers could predominantly share classroom resources with their students on a just-in-time basis. “This perception and the practice of using an LMS as a type of repository, stuck for too long and an appreciation of the true value of what LMS’s have to offer to enhance teaching and learning, has taken very long to establish. Until recently, various challenges were experienced in South Africa with internet connectivity,” shares Geldenhuys. With the limited access to online technologies, educational institutions were forced to focus their mind frame, design and educational best practices around the use of technology from specific campus or school locations only. Additionally, educational institutions

in South Africa have had to navigate through a generation gap in which academic staff were trained and taught without the use of technology, or very limited at the very least, and are teaching a younger population of students that perceive, use and demand technology as part of their learning journey. “As a result, training faculty in digital technologies has to extend far beyond the ‘click-through’ and needs to focus on the value of such technologies from a teaching and learning and student perspective,” asserts Geldenhuys.

Providing training to lecturers on both the innovative use of the LMS and how to facilitate student learning through an online platform was essential. “In our model, lecturers are provided courses on Blackboard Learn where the entire curriculum, resources and engagement opportunities have already been developed for them based on certain educational principles. Unless they know and understand these principles, they and their students will not benefit optimally from the learning experiences that have been created for them,” shares Geldenhuys.

For Cynthia Olmesdahl, statistics and finance lecturer and acting academic lead for The IIE Vega online offering, the Blackboard Learning and Teaching Series also meant ensuring equity in delivery. Since their students may be enrolled at any of the institution’s four brands (IIE Rosebank College, IIE Varsity College, IIE Vega School or The IIE MSA) and may have any of their learning experiences on any of their 23 campuses or online, offering consistent teaching and learning experiences in terms of quality and standard, regardless of the campus, is imperative.

Solution

The Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series came in as a suitable solution to fulfill the needs of The IIE, and a roll out plan was implemented in 2017. The IIE identified the first 63 participants who represented a wide range of staff, including instructional designers and developers, academic staff, Heads of Programme from the Central Academic Team, and academic staff

at campus level. The first cohort experienced some challenges in terms of how the content was initially delivered, so changes were made for future cohorts in which a blended learning mode of delivery was adopted. All three current cohorts will sit for their final assessments at the end of this year,” shares Geldenhuys.

The IIE decided as an institution to have staff complete one course in the program per year. Each ‘brand’ is invited every year to share their list of participants for the different courses in the series. At the moment, they have staff members across their campuses completing different courses of the series and each must apply and motivate why they want to proceed to the next level, including how they have implemented what they’ve learned in their previous course, and how they believe the next stage of the training will positively impact their work. Feedback from participants has been favorable. “The majority of academic staff acknowledged that they have a much better understanding of and appreciation for the courses they have to teach. Also that because they experienced the use of technology in teaching in learning first hand as students, they are able to pre-empt certain situations when they facilitate learning in their own courses,” comments Geldenhuys.

In terms of the learning experience, Olmesdahl believes it is useful to have some prior experience with Blackboard Learn before getting the certification. “I enjoyed the B-course the most because it was practical and hands-on and challenged my use of the LMS from everyday teaching application to more in-depth use of tools and reports to improve monitoring of student engagement, proactive attention to students who are struggling or disengaged and making their learning more exciting. The B and C courses were well-presented, interactive and engaging,” she shares. Paula Hall, lecturing mainly third year modules at The IIE Varsity College, believes that learning from an experienced practitioner who has previously worked with different universities and in different countries makes the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series a great experience. “Also, learning alongside other lecturers from other campuses and brands. The level of detail for course 2 was just right, and the pacing suitable,” she adds. The course 1 provided her with a theoretical background which she believes has strengthened her pedagogical practices, while the practical components of course 2 prompted ideas for new pedagogical practice.

“Having a partner such as Blackboard directly involved in the rolling out of the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series has been a huge advantage in terms of resources. We do not have to free up resources of our own for the facilitation, it allows us to rest at ease that the training and facilitation are of high quality, with similar learning experiences presented to staff across brands as it is delivered by the same person.”

– Hermien Geldenhuys, Senior Instructional Designer in the Central Academic Team at The IIE.





Results: To date, The IIE has reported a number of results since rolling out the training in 2017. Besides having a significant number of faculty now trained and using their learning outcomes in class, there are many other areas within the institution where improvements and change have been observed. As they gear towards the end the academic calendar year, students will be writing or submitting their summative assessments and contact with academic staff will conclude. At that time, The IIE is planning on sending out an institution-wide survey asking students, lectures, and support staff about their impressions and experiences with Blackboard Learn courses. So far, Activity reports on Learn suggest increased online

engagement, and since the IIE has been investing heavily in the design and development of courses on the LMS, they feel the certification is a great return on investment to see an increase in lecturer and student uptake and access of the online resources. “We also expect to see significant increases in not only student success rates, but certainly also throughput rates,” says Goldenhuys.

On the participant’s side, Olmesdahl shares that she has adopted a more student-centric approach to teaching and learning, with tactics such as requiring students to ‘preview’ course content on Blackboard Learn ahead of class, where students are asked to share their understanding and learning. After class, students are able to revise course content and complete activities to assess their understanding. “This approach of ‘daisy-chaining’ self-directed student work with contact teaching and discussion, offers students a three-time ‘touch’ of the material followed by practice, which I find appears to cement student understanding and knowledge very well,” comments Olmesdahl. Other changes she has implemented in her pedagogical practices as a result of the program include using announcements constantly to assist students with pacing their work and awarding them with customized achievement badges for progress and activity completion. “Students at all levels appear to respond well to these awards,” she adds. Other useful tactics she now uses include:

- Using a combination of attendance and feedback on Blackboard Learn – She uses a survey-method in which she requires students to confirm their attendance, to report on activities and to provide feedback. This enables her to monitor student progress and proactively assist students who are falling behind or finding aspects of the course challenging.

“What I have found meaningful is the knowledge I’ve gained of the Learn pedagogical approach and have used in module development. I have been responsible for developing Learn frameworks and Learn storyboards for five modules that I teach. Understanding the Learn structure combined with my classroom experience, I have developed the module content to pace and associate directly with a flipped student-centric contact teaching approach. Much of this understanding has come from the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series.”

- Cynthia Olmesdahl, statistics and finance lecturer and acting academic lead for The IIE Vega online offering, The IIE

Measurable Changes Olmesdahl Reports

- Pass and throughput rates have improved on two of the modules she teaches, which seems to correlate with the increased use of Blackboard Learn for these modules.
- For the first-year module that she teaches, average test scores have increased by 10% (from 72% in 2018 to 82% in 2019) with average project grades increasing by 2% from 70% in 2018 to 72% in 2019. Average exam scores have increased by 2% from 69% to 71%. Throughput has increased by 3% from 86% in 2018 to 89% in 2019.
- For a second-year module, the average project grades have increased by 5% from 77% in 2018 to 82% in 2019. Average exam scores have increased by 5% from 61% in 2018 to 66% in 2019. Throughput has increased by 9% from 81% in 2018 to 90% in 2019.

- Grading all assignments online.
- Communicating with students and the operations support team through Blackboard Learn using course messages.
- Using Blackboard Collaborate and discussion forums for synchronous and asynchronous sessions.

Fortunately, students also seem to be responding well to the changes. According to Olmesdahl, student class attendance has increased, which she believes is a correlation from the motivation and encouragement achieved through activity completion, awards, feedback and identification of challenges. “Students appreciate immediate feedback from self-marked tests and between-class feedback on activities. Using course messages enables an audit trail of messages and an alternative for people to respond in a timelier manner,” she affirms. The changes have benefited her in that she has found class-time preparation reduce, using that gained time on monitoring student progress. Her assignment grading time has also reduced by approximately half.

For Hall, two areas that have prompted a positive response from students are using the group functionality and the advanced use of discussions in Blackboard Learn. The Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series training changed her expectations of peer-to-peer engagement through discussions and tracked pre and post class interactions through the group functionality. This has pointed out to be effective for some subjects and for part-time students who have begun to collaborate outside of the class time and to practice their presentations. “Students have benefited through more collaboration outside the classroom and more accountability for in-class collaboration. I believe this has made their experience more enjoyable and their learning more sustained,” she says.

The changes implemented have also notably benefitted Hall, who says the training has allowed her to entrench a socio-constructivist teaching practice and track student engagement and collaboration. It has sparked new ideas for teaching practice both in the classroom and for distance students. It has also given me impetus for storyboard development which has become a passion.” She is currently planning on surveying students through the survey tool (a skill she acquired from the training series). At the moment, she can report high throughput rates, with seven courses last year over 85% and top national rates at her brand in three of those. Feedback from distance students is also positive, in terms of the support she provides on Blackboard Learn.

“...I’d just like to take a moment in this break to thank you for the pleasure of being one of your distance students this semester. Your provision of collab content to unpack the concepts, your summary worksheets and updates to remind us of the schedule we should be sticking to, have allowed me to achieve 90% for this module (which I was not expecting). Your commitment as our online tutor has given me the tools and ability to be able to get this far this semester and I simply couldn’t express how grateful I am to online tutors like you. Without your guidance and content, I doubt I would have been able to achieve these marks, and for that, I am so appreciative to have you as my online tutor.”

– IIE Student

In Conclusion

Providing academic staff with high-quality professional development to bolster the power of an LMS through effective teaching and learning practices, greatly improves the faculty and student experience. Faculty members can learn how to optimize tools already at their disposal so that students gain a superior learning experience that will propel them to become engaged and results-driven learners. Education institutions can confidently rely on the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series to provide the necessary professional development that will create consistent and world-class teaching, increase the value on investment of their learning technology and be in compliance with institution standards for teaching.

“I would definitely recommend institutions choosing Blackboard. Not only does it provide faculty an opportunity to learn from international, experienced practitioners who have worked with different universities from different countries, but the fact that the curriculum of the Blackboard Digital Teaching and Learning Series is LMS and institution agnostic, results in the focus of the training being on what is most critical – using digital technologies to enhance teaching and learning”

– Hermien Geldenhuys, Senior Instructional Designer in the Central Academic Team at The IIE.

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