

Expanding the Possibilities with Web-Flex Courses

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Abstract

Learn how Edison Community College merged the best of both worlds by finding a balance between courses delivered in a traditional face-to-face format with classes delivered totally online. This presentation will detail the steps taken by Edison to work with faculty to create an environment that enhances the learning experience for our students. Web-Flex courses have been enthusiastically received on our campus with requests from students for more web-flex classes. The web-flex option has freed up classroom space, given students more flexibility in completing course assignments, and moved many group project assignments to the online environment for collaboration.

Introduction:

Edison Community College, like many colleges across the U.S., has been struggling to get a handle on creating successful online courses. Enrollment and demand for online courses has always been high on our campus. Like many institutions we are working to monitor the content of online courses, trying to maintain the same pedagogical objectives in our online courses as we do for courses delivered in the traditional face-to-face format. A solution needed to be found to accommodate both the needs of the students, and the needs of the faculty and administration.

Two key pieces of solving this puzzle were the introduction of Blackboard on our campus as course management software, and a grant that was received from the Ohio Board of Regents (OBR), on our campus referred to as the “content grant”.

Objectives

Equipment

The objective of pushing forward with a new method of delivery on our campus was a natural migration of two main initiatives on our campus, the smart classroom, and the flex courses.

Prior to receiving the content grant a few classrooms on the Edison campus were equipped with a computer, a VCR and a data projector. These classrooms were highly in demand on our campus, and were usually scheduled with classes from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm. There were a few portable smart carts that could be reserved for faculty who needed the additional technology, but this was limiting to full-time and adjunct faculty. The content grant enabled Edison to make every classroom smart. Each classroom is now equipped with state-of-the-art technology:

- Hewlett Packard E-PC42s
 - 1.8 ghz Pentium 4 processors
 - DVD ROMs
 - 256 MB of RAM
 - 40 gig hard drives
 - Windows XP Professional
 - 15” LCD displays
- Toshiba data projector
- JVC Super VHS – Video Cassette Player

Sixty additional computers were also purchased and placed on campus in the following locations:

- (15) The Learning Center
- (15) The Edison Library
- (30) The new Edison Internet Café

These computers were placed in key locations on campus to provide students with equipment and space to access and complete assignments that were delivered as the web portion of their web-flex classes.

Faculty Selection

Faculty from a cross-section of programs on campus submitted their names to the Academic Vice President to be considered for participation in the content grant. A total of 19 courses were slated to be created and delivered for the fall 2002 semester. Some of the programs included were business, nursing, sociology, early childhood development and biology. Many of the faculty in these areas began using Blackboard for web enhancement during the spring of 2002.

Before participating in the project full-time and adjunct faculty were each required to sign a contract that contained the following guidelines:

1. Blackboard must be the medium used to deliver the online content.
2. The syllabus for the course will demonstrate how the blended flex activities are integrated into the course learning objectives.
3. Appropriate links in Blackboard to support blended flex activities will be established.
4. The developed blended flex course will be available to serve as the common syllabus for all sections of that course.
5. Streaming video developed as a component of developed blended flex courses will be available for use in other sections of courses.

6. Participants in this grant will agree to share experiences with others during the development of course materials or activities.
7. Developers of blended flex activities and faculty that teach the courses will participate in course assessment (surveys, etc.) and will present this project to both internal and external groups.

Blackboard

Blackboard was introduced on the Edison campus during the summer of 2001. The initial intent when purchasing the Blackboard license was to put in place standard course management software that could be used by faculty teaching online classes. A few early adopters began using Blackboard in the fall of 2001 for enhancements to their face-to-face classes and the wave of users on our campus began to grow.

Faculty Training

Most of the faculty participating in the content grant were familiar with using Blackboard for a web-enhanced class, moving a portion of the assignments into the online environment required additional faculty training. Training sessions for faculty began in earnest in the spring of 2002. All faculty on campus were invited to attend the Blackboard training sessions. Bringing the faculty together for these training sessions offered benefits far beyond what could be accomplished in the one-to-one training sessions that had previously been offered. In depth study and discussion on each of the tools of Blackboard and how they could be used to deliver the web based tasks for the web-flex courses was explored further. The early adopters who had achieved some success using Blackboard as an enhancement began to investigate more options for delivering materials online, and for building online learning communities. Faculty were now working side-by-side with faculty in other disciplines, mentoring began to happen in the training sessions, and carried over after the training sessions ended. Faculty began to share resources and ideas that had been learned while using Blackboard for their particular course that would be effective for faculty teaching in other areas.

The web-flex courses required a higher level of technology skills than some traditional face-to-face instructors had used in the past. By working with the technologists in the ITS department faculty were able to convert hard copies of information into electronic documents that could be posted to the Blackboard site. Paper and pencil testing was also moved to Blackboard to be automatically graded and placed in the course gradebook.

The ITS technologists began working with faculty to show them how in some cases they could reduce their efforts in completing routine tasks and focus that time and energy on other areas of activity with students. One example of a technology based time saver was introduced for grading papers. Faculty learned how to use the track changes feature in Microsoft Word when grading student papers electronically.

Blackboard YOU

It became apparent during the early faculty training sessions that more time would need to be provided for faculty to begin building their courses in Blackboard. Blackboard YOU provided an opportunity for faculty to bring their course materials to the computer lab and work with technologists to build their Blackboard sites. Working with a technologist, instructors could discuss options for delivering portions of their class in the online environment.

Challenges

The courses in the content grant were required to be in the schedule of classes for the fall 2002 semester. The deadline for completion of the courses for review by the academic deans was set for July 31, 2002. This requirement meant that some of the work for development of these courses would need to be handled during the summer.

Weekly Newsletters

Because of the diversity of the group selected to participate in the content grant, regular meetings of participants were impossible to pull together. In an effort to keep participants focused and moving on task, a newsletter was created and e-mailed (and “snail mailed”) to participants each week. The weekly newsletters featured pedagogical information for building activities online, information about a highlighted Blackboard tool of the week, and tips and suggestions for working in the online environment.

Course Review

Following the Blackboard YOU workshops, faculty were encouraged to view their course not only as an instructor, but also as a student. Some instructors asked for input from other faculty in their department, others worked with the ITS technologists for further fine tuning and suggestions for the web components in their course area.

Each course area created in Blackboard for the content grant had a login established for the academic dean. This gave the academic deans access to evaluate the pedagogical soundness of the online activities for the course and an opportunity to review and be assured that all objectives in the syllabus for the course were being met.

The course was ready for fall delivery---the next step was to add the students.

New format surprised some students

The new web-flex courses that were to be rolled out for the 2002 fall semester were listed in the college schedule book as web-flex. Many students, faculty, and academic advisors were not clear at the time of registration what exactly web-flex courses involved. From the lessons learned in the summer piloted web-flex biology class a training plan for students was put in place for the fall semester. An aggressive campaign of classroom orientations for the fall web-flex courses was undertaken.

Training was accomplished using the new technology in the classrooms by presenting the Blackboard course on screen for the students, and reviewing along with the instructor the content in the Blackboard course site. A mobile laptop computer lab was also used to ensure that students were able to log into the Blackboard site and access course materials. Additional two hour workshops were held to train students who needed further assistance with the Blackboard tools to access assignments, participate in discussions, and to use online testing.

Fall Semester Training	# Sessions	# Students
Orientation	5	51
Library/Learning Center	2	9
In-Class training sessions	27	324
Blackboard 2 hour workshops	6	25
Total	40	409
Spring Semester Training	# Sessions	# Students
In-Class training sessions	16	226
Blackboard 2 hour workshops	4	6
Total	20	232
Grand Total	60	641

Additional Blackboard support was developed for the spring semester for an online version of the Blackboard training. To date, there have been over 600 student page accesses to this online Blackboard tutorial. Online student access to the ITS technologists was also piloted using MSN Instant Messenger. Students could add ITS technologists to their MSN IM list. Student and technologist could then log into the Blackboard training area and work together on individual questions and problems with Blackboard. This greatly reduced the response time for students needing assistance with Blackboard.

Outcomes

Web-Flex Mode Satisfaction:

Students were surveyed at the mid term of the web-flex course to assess satisfaction during the first semester of the web-flex mode implementation. Students were asked the following questions:

- How would you rate your satisfaction with the web-flex instruction format:
37 % Very satisfied with the web-flex format
40 % Satisfied with the web-flex format
19 % Somewhat satisfied with the web-flex format
3 % Not satisfied with the web-flex format
1 % No response
- What do you like about the web-flex format?

- What didn't you like about the web-flex format?
- What changes would you like to see?

The survey results were then shared with the faculty members in order to put in place improvements to the course before the semester ended.

Students and faculty members were both surveyed at the end of the fall semester to gauge their satisfaction, an adjustment was made to the initial survey, and the somewhat satisfied option was eliminated.

- How would you rate your satisfaction with the web-flex instruction format:
46 % Very satisfied with the web-flex format
40 % Satisfied with the web-flex format
14 % Not satisfied with the web-flex format
- What do you like about the web-flex format?
The number one comment from students was the convenience of this new format. Students like the ability to meet less frequently in the traditional classroom, yet still felt connected to the faculty through traditional class meetings.
- What didn't you like about the web-flex format?
We found that some non-traditional students initially struggled in this new format.
- What changes would you like to see?
A number of suggestions were provided by students to help faculty improve the course for delivery in future semesters.

The faculty survey included the following comments:

- Easy access to students, day and night! Saw much more interaction between and among students through the discussion board.
- Provides closer contact with students via e-mail. The student that is usually quiet in the traditional classroom often interacts more with the instructor on a one-on-one experience. More immediate response to individual students and group needs.
- It places more responsibility on the student for learning. It also allows students the flexibility and freedom of time and space for completing the work and course.
- For the students that I had, who had a lot of other obligations I thought that the format afforded them great flexibility. They had easy access to the material we covered, the schedule, and best of all I didn't have to carry around weeks worth of handouts for the students who had been absent and needed that material. More than ½ of my Web-Flex students took their tests and final exam at off-site locations. I think that this helped alleviate a lot of the stress that surrounds the test environment.

Web-Flex Course Growth:

Following the success of the fall 2002 implementation of the web-flex format, more instructors began to shift courses to this new mode of delivery.

- Fall semester 2002
17 web-flex courses 241 students
- Spring semester 2003
29 web-flex courses 363 students
- Fall semester 2003
39 web-flex courses in the new schedule

Lessons Learned

Not all classes lend themselves well to the web-flex environment.

Some students in specific disciplines such as Human Services found the format did not meet their needs. The Human Services faculty member will continue to use the material created for a web-flex format as a web-enhancement to the course.

Some classes require a longer ramp up for successful implementation.

A biology course that was offered in the summer prior to the start up of this project received less than favorable reviews. With the suggestions of the students, and the ITS technologists, a few adjustments were made to the course, and for the fall semester, that course received a 100% satisfied response from the students enrolled in the fall web-flex version of this course.

Faculty training

During the initial start up for this grant, the 19 content grant participants received individual, and workshop training while developing their web-flex courses. The faculty in the content grant received additional materials through the weekly e-mails with information helpful to developing the online portion of their courses. New training and mentoring opportunities will need to be made available for new instructors moving into this mode of course delivery. Some previous training mechanisms such as Blackboard YOU, and the weekly informational letters will need to be put into place for instructors developing courses for the fall 2003 semester. Web-Flex courses that are currently offered will continue to be “tweaked”.

New Initiatives for 2003-2004 Academic Year

Online Blackboard Training

The online Blackboard training area has been well received by faculty and students. Many of Edison’s faculty members are adjunct faculty. Offering Blackboard training online for instructors would give them access to the training modules at their convenience. By presenting the ma-

terials to adjunct faculty in this manner, we will also be able to demonstrate “best practices” in offering information in the online environment. Target completion date: Fall 2003.

Content Grant Web Site

To continue the success of the web-flex courses, it is important to present a roadmap of where we have been in developing the courses, and where we are heading in this project. By sharing survey results and comments with all faculty interested in delivering courses in the web-flex format we can perhaps avoid some of the pitfalls experienced by the early adopters. Target completion date: Spring/Summer 2003.

Best Practices Training

The administration on this campus is supporting faculty who are working to develop courses with totally online, or partially online content by offering time for full-time faculty an afternoon of best practices training. Faculty who have been successful in the online environment will present their ideas and success in face-to-face on campus workshops. Target date of first offering: Fall 2003

Development with Full-time Faculty of Blackboard Course Shells

This initiative will pair full-time faculty members with ITS technologists to develop courses that can be copied and used by full-time and adjunct faculty members. The initial course development will focus on courses that are taught in multiple sections, and delivered by a high percentage of adjunct instructors. These courses will be developed with activities that can be used for web-enhanced, web-flex, or totally online courses. One of the pilot projects for this new project is the Personal Computer Applications course. This course is currently required for most degree programs at Edison. The course will not only include course work, but will also have a built-in Blackboard tutorial to guide students through the use of the technology as they are using the Blackboard tools in their course. Ongoing, target date for first course deployments fall 2003.

Expansion of MSN Instant Messenger Project

An effort will be made to expand the use of MSN instant messenger for both faculty and students for support for online, web-enhanced, and web-flex courses. The spring 2003 semester roll out was a small beginning that can easily be expanded for the fall 2003 semester.

The expansion of the MSN project will include both full-time and adjunct faculty members. MSN instant messenger will be used as a way to communicate for “real time” responses to faculty questions regarding Blackboard and their course sites. The ITS technologists will be able to work hand-in-hand in the Blackboard course site with faculty members as questions arise. This will help to alleviate the support concerns of the new faculty who will be moving toward the web-flex format for fall 2003. It may also encourage faculty to use MSN as a way to communicate with their students.

The number of web-flex courses for the fall 2003 semester has more than doubled from the numbers for the fall of 2002. It is a very real possibility that some students will not be able to attend face-to-face training sessions. Expanding the use of MSN and the online student Blackboard tutorial continue to support the high percentage of student satisfaction experienced in the web-flex course delivery.

Summary

Web-flex courses were warmly received by the majority of faculty and students on our campus during the first year of implementation. Lessons learned from the summer pilot course helped to push many of the initiatives that were put in place prior to the start of the fall 2002 semester. Each semester we have continued to improve training sessions and opportunities for faculty and students. It makes sense to begin working with faculty in web-enhanced courses, and then migrate to the web-flex format. We are constantly working with faculty and sharing information that will help them begin to see opportunities to move coursework traditionally completed in the face-to-face classroom, to a partially online environment.

Web-flex courses have created a win-win situation on our campus for students and faculty. Students have access to course materials and assignments from home, from the Edison library, the Learning Center and Internet Café. Learning communities are being formed in the Blackboard course area. Students are finding that the group function in Blackboard enables them to stay connected to not only their instructor, but other classmates.

Many of the initiatives that were developed to help faculty and students who participated in web-flex classes were beneficial to students enrolled in web-enhanced and online courses. The pieces of the puzzle individually may have made a small impact on campus. When the final puzzle pieces were locked into place with the deployment of the smart classrooms, the addition of Blackboard course management software, the additional computer access in the library, the Learning Center, and the Internet Café, and the willingness of faculty to participate in this new venture—a new era of technology emerged on our campus. Not the use of technology for technology's sake, but technology as a tool to enhance the learning experience for both Edison students and faculty.

"The value of an idea is in the using of it."

----Thomas Alva Edison