

# French on the Blackboard... No More Chalk on the Fingers: French Courses on a High-Tech Blackboard

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*"Imagine a world where technology means opportunity not complexity."*<sup>1</sup>

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In July 1999, along with twelve colleagues from the University of New Hampshire (five in the College of Liberal Arts), I was invited to participate in the UNH Blackboard Project, a program that is part of a larger initiative sponsored by a partnership between the UNH Library and UNH Computing and Information Services. The goal of this partnership is to provide technical support to faculty who want to explore Internet technologies and incorporate them into their courses. More specifically, the goal of the UNH Blackboard Project in its initial phase was to prepare a number of Web sites to support courses for the Fall semester of the Academic Year (AY) 1999-2000, using course-management software called Blackboard (formerly CourseInfo), produced and marketed by Blackboard Inc.<sup>1</sup> On-line education has revolutionized the teaching methods of a good number of educators who use Internet technologies to communicate and collaborate with their students in an educational context. With a program like Blackboard, traditional methods of teaching and learning are supplemented with Web-based components and virtual forms of communication.

In the Fall semester of 1999, a total of sixteen Blackboard courses were taught on the UNH campus, two in the College of Liberal Arts, including Introduction to French Studies (FREN 425), a course I was teaching for the second time in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures. In the Spring semester of 2000, I used my experience with Blackboard to rethink and reorganize the content of France in the European Union (FREN 677), one of the core courses in the French major at UNH. I also included Blackboard in a new elective course in the UNH

Honors program Introduction to French Children's Literature in English Translation (INCO 404). Since then, all my courses have a Blackboard website support, a reflection no doubt of the success of this program among faculty members and students at UNH, as the following figures will show.

In the Spring semester of AY 99-00, a total of 52 courses were taught with Blackboard support (19 in the College of Liberal Arts, 3 in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures). 140 Blackboard courses were taught in the fall semester of AY 2000-01, and 166 in the Spring semester of that same academic year. As of this writing, 287 faculty members have been trained by the UNH Blackboard Project Team, and over 18,000 students have had a UNH Blackboard account at some point or another in the last two academic years.

An evaluation of this two-year long experience with on-line teaching and learning with Blackboard may be helpful to colleagues by providing some feedback on the addition of Web-based techniques to different French courses.

Blackboard makes course information, announcements, assignments, tests, and supplementary materials available via the Internet twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It also gives students and teachers access to on-line discussion groups, live chat rooms, file transfer utilities and virtual field trips, all through an easy-to-use Web interface. Instructors do not have to know HTML programming to use Blackboard. The following quote summarizes briefly the "educational advantages that arise when supplementing a course with web-based tools. These include:

- Enhancing student-to-student and faculty-to-student communication.
- Enabling student-centered teaching approaches.
- Providing 24/7 accessibility to course materials.
- Providing just-in-time methods to assess and evaluate student progress.
- Reducing "administrivia" around course management."<sup>2</sup>

Introduction to French Studies is a course that was designed in the early nineties with the goal of attracting first-year students who needed to satisfy the Foreign Culture requirement in their General Education program. It is currently offered as a French course in the French program, as well as a "World's Literatures

and Cultures in English" course sponsored by the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures. I am currently restructuring this course in order to make it a foundation course in the newly created interdisciplinary major in European Cultural Studies.

My first version of Introduction to French Studies was "traditional" in many respects. With an enrollment of over thirty students, it was delivered in a lecture format accompanied by a number of video clips, film excerpts, slide shows and laserdisc presentations. This left very little time for discussion. Throughout the semester, I became increasingly frustrated with not having the technology I needed at my fingertips. We have all experienced the nightmare of failing lamps in slide projectors, jammed videocassettes, or remote controls missing from audio-visual boxes. Time goes so quickly in a classroom setting that any delays or failures in the technology can jeopardize the most carefully organized lesson plan. Needless to say, discussion time is also sacrificed if anything goes wrong during the class. Blackboard provided the help I needed to organize my materials more efficiently for my second attempt at Introduction to French Studies, scheduled for the Fall semester of 1999.

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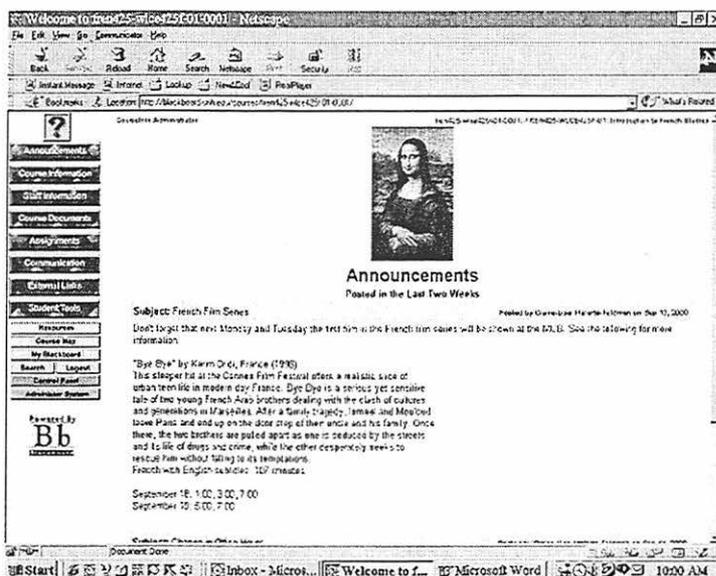
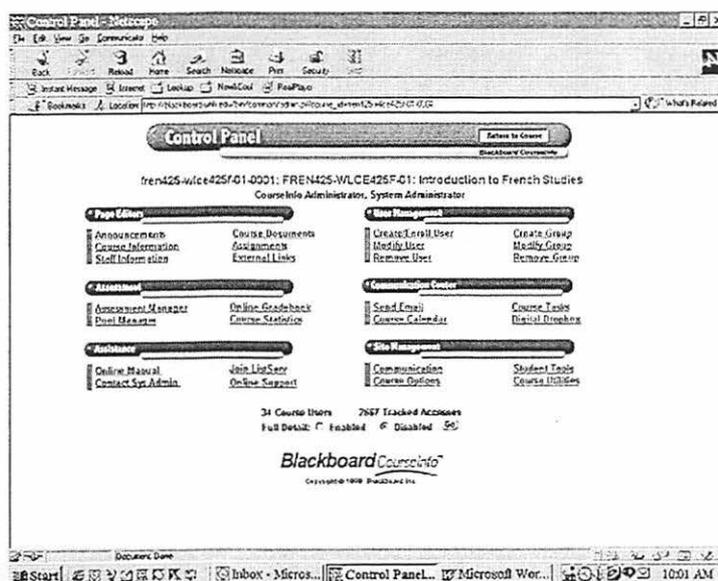


Figure 1 shows a typical Blackboard course home page. The navigation system, located on the left-hand side of the screen,

consists of a series of tabs that enable students to move through the different course sections: Announcements (the default home page), Course Information, Staff Information, Course Documents, Assignments, Communication, External Links and Student Tools. On their own Blackboard Web pages, instructors have a Control Panel button that students do not see. This button allows instructors to upload or download information relevant to their courses, thereby making it available to their students through the interface. Figure 2 shows the Blackboard Instructor Control Panel.



Course Information can be as basic as a course description (cut and pasted from a document created in Word, for example), Staff Information enables to list a few simple facts about the instructor of the course (office location, telephone number, names of teaching assistants, etc).

Under Course Documents, an instructor can upload or link to all kinds of materials created in a wide range of media: audio, video, graphics, etc. For example, in a unit entitled "Stereotypes and Realities of France," I used an award-winning TV commercial for Perrier, a 30-second video clip that was formatted for me by one of the skilled technicians at the UNH Instructional

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Development Center. The video material was edited and compressed to ensure that it would download easily and efficiently for students through the interface.

The External Links button gives instructors an easy way to create a catalog of resources specifically targeted on the needs of the course. For example, in my Introduction to French Studies course, folders of US and French newspapers and magazines, museums websites, film reviews, etc. are made available to students, and updated and complemented on a regular basis throughout the semester. In fact, any information on the Internet pertinent to the subject matter of the course can be easily and instantly linked through Blackboard and then discussed during the next class meeting. This represents a definite advantage in a course with a strong cultural component and so focused on "l'actualité" that no textbook is current enough. For my course "France in the European Union," we made our own "virtual textbook" by compiling a series of relevant articles and documents. Students then accessed these materials using the External Links button in their Blackboard course Web sites. At the end of the semester, the course evaluations showed that this kind of active involvement in the selection and preparation of course readings was judged as one of the strongest points of the course.

The simplicity and efficiency of the Blackboard Communication features are another strong point of the Blackboard course sites. At the beginning of the semester, the UNH project administrators, working with the Registrar's office, uploaded the class roster into my Blackboard course page, generating a list of user names and e-mail addresses that is available through the Control Panel. This process also automatically generates an electronic mailing list. From this list, I can choose to send messages to my entire class, to one or several students in the class, or to students whom I have previously organized into workgroups. Besides its practicality, this feature introduces a unique tool into the student/teacher relationship that can give this interaction increased meaning and depth. Through electronic communication, the learning and teaching process becomes more interactive and student-centered.

On-line education enables a higher level of personalized learning in which students have a better chance of expressing their own views, as well as getting what they expect from the course. Questions that may not be asked in class (because of timidity, or lack of time, or a number of other reasons) can be raised via

e-mail, giving students “a sense of equality.” This increased accessibility makes for better student-centered teaching. It also gives students and instructors an easy way to bring closure to topics that have not been exhausted in class, by allowing them to engage in an immediate e-mail exchange that follows up on a given point from exactly where the discussion was left in class. Moreover, students can e-mail their readers’ responses before a text is discussed in class, giving the instructor a chance to include some of these comments in a lesson plan, and thus empowering students in their choices of discussion topics. After a unit on any given topic is completed, an e-mail discussion can be initiated by students themselves on the Discussion Board of their Blackboard Web page.

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We often experienced this double advantage of on-line discussions in my French 677 course, where I had a relatively small group of highly motivated students eager to go to France for the first time in their lives, or to return there. A wide-open topic such as “France in the European Union” is always evolving and each student may want to choose a specific focus. Blackboard not only facilitates an ongoing dialogue between student and educator in and out of the classroom, it also enables students to define their own research according to their personal interests at an early stage in the course through easy access to Internet resources. In turn, I can respond to each student with a link to any information pertinent to their individual project or topic, thus initiating a dialogue that can help students prepare a better presentation. This exchange can add depth and focus to a well-informed project, while remaining within the framework of the course objectives.

One of the great pedagogical advantages of a Blackboard course is that it makes available at all times materials that can only be accessed once in a traditional classroom setting. For example, in a unit on issues related to cultural identity, I placed a song by the regional contemporary group Manau and another by the *bourgeois* singer Khaled under the Course Documents button. The music was presented as an audio clip, while the lyrics were synchronized on the screen. In my seminar on French children’s literature, a PowerPoint presentation of 18th-century French paintings helps students reflect upon issues of representations of families in the Ancien Régime. Yet another PowerPoint presentation of illustrators of Perrault’s *Contes* facilitates conversations on the evolution of fairy tale narratives and their illustrations (FREN 762: Introduction to French Seventeenth-Century Literature). Students can access this material as often

as they need or want to. They can therefore start an analytical process earlier, which can in turn lead to more meaningful discussions in class and provide a good reader-response environment—one that can be extended beyond the classroom thanks to the various options available through the Blackboard communication features.<sup>3</sup>

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Blackboard is an important tool for on-line education. I am far from having exhausted its potential or explored all its features. For instance, each course site gives the instructor newest version of Blackboard (version 5.5), which should be available for the Fall semester of AY 2001-02, will hopefully make this function easier to use. However, creating my Blackboard courses has been greatly facilitated through the efforts of UNH's Blackboard Project Team.<sup>4</sup> This team has provided support to students and faculty alike, advising on everything from file formats to browser settings—all those little details that can make or break any on-line initiative. My past year's experience has shown me that support is a crucial issue to consider in making course materials available on-line.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, off-campus students, who are often nontraditional students without easy access to high-performance computers or Internet connections, tended to have more difficulty in using Blackboard than traditional students who lived on campus.

On the UNH campus, the technology sometimes gets ahead of the classroom facilities available. Here, "super-tech classrooms" (equipped with overhead computer projection and Ethernet lines) must be requested ahead of time by instructors who need to have Internet access in their courses. More of these classrooms become available each semester throughout the campus. They are essential to ensure continuity between individualized work on the Internet and collective work in the classroom.

Despite the indisputably user-friendly nature of Blackboard, the preparation of documents nonetheless requires advance planning and may occasionally be time-consuming. The time required, however, is nothing compared to the hassles of failing audio-visual equipment or of duplicating and distributing photocopied materials in class. We have all faced the dilemma caused by the student who is absent on a particular day when reading materials are handed out in class, and who may never get the text in time for discussion. With a document presented through a Blackboard course page, materials are always available.

Undeniably, there are increasing demands on the learner's availability, as well as on the educator's time.<sup>6</sup> With a program like Blackboard, the pace of communication is drastically accelerated. The roles of students and instructors shift from more traditional and rigid models to personal and student-centered interactions. Communication is facilitated, even if, ironically, it is a computer that acts as the facilitator. Without ever aiming to replace the teacher in the classroom, on-line education can free up precious time that can be invested in more personalized and focused in-class activities. It can extend the teaching and learning process beyond class time, and, finally, extend the walls of the physical classroom to encompass a more global environment. ♦

## Notes

1. "Company vision." Blackboard Inc. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://company.blackboard.com/vision.cgi?SELECT=21> Cited 16 September 2000.
2. Blackboard Inc. <http://www.blackboard.com>. Founded in 1997, Blackboard began as a collaboration with students and faculty at Cornell University. It is now used in more than 3300 colleges, schools, associations and companies in every state and 70 countries. It has a user base of more than 2.1 million people and a market projected to reach \$46 billion over the next five years.
3. For more information on the use of the Web as a college teaching tool, see Laura Freburg, "Integrating Internet Resources into the Higher Education Classroom," *Syllabus*, March 2000 (13.7): 48-50.
4. On the effect of the presentation of on-line materials for better class discussions and analysis, see David Lang, "Critical Thinking in Web Courses: An Oxymoron?" *Syllabus*, September 2000, (14.2): 20-24.
5. I wish to thank the whole team of the Blackboard Pilot Project at the University of New Hampshire for their unfailing help and availability, with special thanks to Joanne Adams and Laurie Trufant in Computer Instructional Services who trained me in Blackboard and Joe Danahy in Academic Support Services who helped me produce some beautiful materials. I am grateful to Laurie Trufant who accepted to read and edit this article with the competence of a true technical editor.
6. On the need for support, see Steven W. Gilbert. "A

Widening Gap: The Support Services Crisis," *Syllabus*, August 2000 (14.1):18, 57. See also Barbara Truman Davis, et al., "Support for Online Teaching and Learning," *Education Quarterly* (23.2): 44-51.

7. In fact, student evaluations of my first attempt at FREN425 using Blackboard were far from unanimously positive. In particular, students complained of the increased demand on their time outside the classroom. After that initial experience, I learned to dedicate enough time at the beginning of the semester to explain to my students how Blackboard works, and to emphasize that it constitutes an important component of their course that can enable them to enhance their overall performance.

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