

BLACKBOARD: A NEW KIND OF TEACHING TOOL

Since Exeter implemented its My Exeter community Web portal, more commonly referred to by its proprietary name, Blackboard, teachers in all departments have found an ideal place for storing, organizing and managing class materials such as documents, multimedia presentations and links to pertinent websites, as well as a useful set of tools for delivering these to their students in one convenient place via the Web. In addition, Blackboard's communication and file-sharing capabilities help organize the campus through academic and organizationally defined user groups.

"A portal, or doorway into a website, allows for different materials to be delivered to different audiences through the same toolset," explains academic technology support coordinator Vi Richter, who supports Blackboard users on campus and conducts training sessions at other schools. The portal is password protected, customizable, and offers users the ability to create home pages, post announcements and documents, participate in virtual classrooms and take online tests at discrete course websites. Blackboard consolidates information by displaying announcements from all of a user's courses in one place, and it simplifies administrative tasks such as keeping up-to-date campus email lists. In addition, says Richter, "I've had veteran teachers who are not necessarily particularly technologically oriented tell me that Blackboard enables them to think about and organize course materials in new ways."

History instructor Jack Herney often primes class discussions by posting a question about a reading assignment on the class discussion board. His students must then go online between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m., read their classmates' responses to the question and post their own. "Further, they must check back in a few minutes to see what's been said to what they added, and respond to it," Herney says. "I read it all in the early morning and use bits and pieces to initiate discussion in class." Herney says the students invest in this process, and often see sides of their classmates they might not otherwise see. "It's a more informal discussion and different personalities seem to emerge," he explains. "They can be funny, outrageous, provocative—very entertaining to read. It's very stimulating for the class."

Sharon Finley, instructor in chemistry, uses Blackboard to provide resources for students in her geology electives. "Geologists

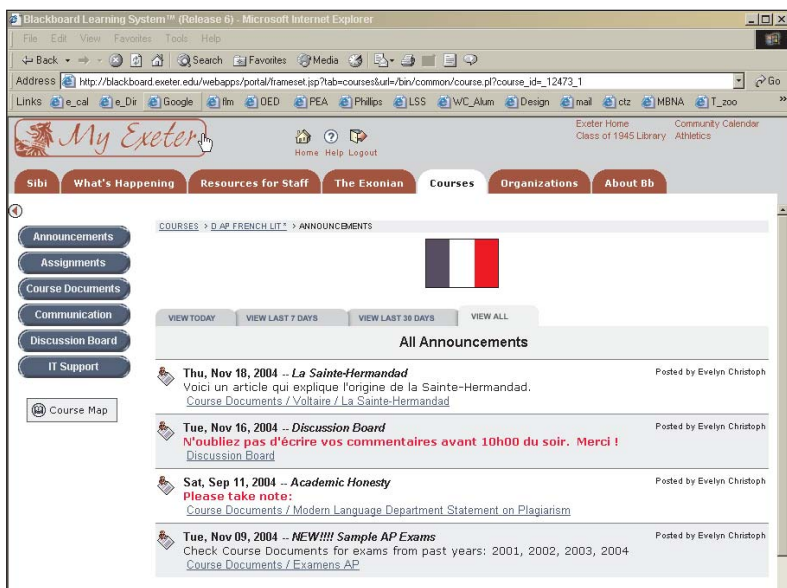
were among the first to post their huge databases on the Internet so the information could be shared worldwide," she says. "I've compiled a great collection of websites on volcanology, seismicity and earthquakes, minerals and rocks (including beautiful collections from museums that are available to study online), mountain-building, geologic time—you name it—which I post under organized external links on the class Blackboard site." Finley uses online texts from the United States Geological Survey because they are well organized, kept up-to-date and pitched at the right level for Exeter students. Furthermore, they are free. Through Blackboard, "I can assign students to read online text or look at specific sites as homework, or I can call up these links in class," says Finley. When students do projects of their own, Finley helps them set up their own folders of external links she has vetted for sound science.

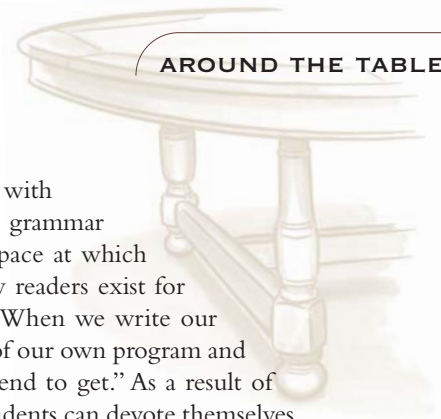
"I give course evaluations through Blackboard, and students know the information is anonymous," says instructor in French Evelyn Christoph, who uses the portal's tools extensively at every

level of French instruction and introduces new students to the portal through Junior Studies, a required interdisciplinary study course for preps. Christoph believes learning a language is a means of experiencing a culture, and Internet technology offers her ways to create that experience in the classroom. Through Blackboard, Christoph posts links to external sites as well as to materials she herself has created and put on the Web, such as a compilation of notes from a previous class discussion

or a custom Power Point chapter on grammar. This way, she says, "students can have as many copies of a worksheet as they like, and they sometimes do the exercises several times to help review for a test." She has designed Internet activities such as looking up the train schedule to travel from one French city to another, grocery shopping or even apartment hunting online—all in French, of course. "These activities work from beginning classes right through AP language, as I can vary the expectations and vocabulary to fit the level of the course," she says.

Christoph's advanced students visit French sites such as *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* to read an assignment and respond, in French, through the online class discussion board. "Students can write summaries and we can correct them in class without having to take the time to put everything on the board," she says. Beginning students click to online readers that combine images,





Evelyn Christoph, instructor in French

audio files featuring the department's native speakers and hometown stories with embedded hyperlinks to vocabulary and grammar resources. "Reading skills accelerate the pace at which students learn the language, but very few readers exist for first-year students," Christoph explains. "When we write our own material, we can gear it to the goals of our own program and to the exceptional level of students we tend to get." As a result of putting these materials online, she says, students can devote themselves to paying attention and participating in class, and when they review the online materials at home, they benefit from the aural reinforcement of hearing the same story in multiple voices.

A tool for both gathering and disseminating ideas and information that serves both individual and collaborative study, "Blackboard is limited only by our imagination," Christoph says. ●

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A JOB WELL DONE

Gregg Willett, a member of PEA's facilities management team, had lots of reasons for taking courses toward his associate's degree, but moving on to a better job elsewhere wasn't among them. Willett attends classes in heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration (HVAC) two nights a week at Manchester Community Technical College, he says, "because it helps me perform my job at Exeter more efficiently." Exeter underwrites Willett's schooling for the same reason. Being committed to professional development is one way in which the Academy attracts high-caliber personnel and keeps them.

For Willett, who began working part-time in Exeter's carpentry shop nearly 20 years ago before taking a full-time position in the heating station, becoming an HVAC maintenance mechanic represents an opportunity to take on more responsibility without leaving a community in which he feels very invested. Maintaining systems in all of the Academy's

129 buildings gives him a global view of the school and the chance to interact with students, faculty and staff in every area of the campus. "I'm part of a community and a team," he says, noting that working on a campus makes for a much more meaningful relationship with his "customers" than he would have if he were an independent contractor.

At HVAC school, Willett has particularly enjoyed the

combination of theory and practical training that he believes makes him a better and more self-sufficient troubleshooter. "It's exciting to put together a piece of equipment you've never worked with before and get it running," he says of his lab courses. Willett lives in Exeter with his wife and two children, and the family makes use of the nearby campus facilities and attends as many plays, concerts, games and special events as

possible. He says juggling school and family life isn't easy, but being able to grow in his job at the Academy has meant being able to work near his home and his children's schools. "I do my homework with the kids," he says.

Working close to home also means that being on call when things go wrong after hours is not the hardship it could be. One evening recently, he got a call that a climate sensor in the church was malfunctioning. Since the new organ was being voiced, the problem couldn't wait. "I was home alone with the kids, so I

put them in the car and took them with me," he says. Jacob, 9, and Morgan, 6, watched the Italian organ builders at work while Willett used his new skills to improvise a solution until a new sensor could be delivered. "When we left, the Italians said, 'Goodbye, Jacob! Goodbye, Morgan!'" he says. "What a great opportunity for my kids." ●



Gregg Willett, HVAC maintenance mechanic