From Soup to Nuts:

Creating a Vibrant, Full-Scale Learning Community Using Blackboard Technology

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**Description of the Capstone Process**

Nothing feels more rewarding than conceiving a plan, setting that plan into action, and watching how the plan unfolds, building a stronger organization as a result. My Capstone project, which I introduced using Blackboard technology as a platform to engender fertile communication and collaboration, became the vehicle to accomplish this and so much more. Our Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) has morphed from an idea in my mind to a living, thriving learning community of teachers and administrators, a place in which we can come together to share a common purpose and a common vision:  increased academic achievement using practical, available technology.

Beginning in July of 2012, I knew very little about Blackboard, other than the fact that it existed. One year prior to this date, I had wanted to use Blackboard in my classroom to do a few “flipped classroom” projects.  However, time got away from me, and I was not able to move forward on that project. When we had to commit to our Capstone Project, using Blackboard technology in a meaningful way was my immediate thought. I had just done some research in another class about professional learning groups, so I synthesized the two ideas together and knowing Blackboard would be an excellent way for teachers to collaborate, exchange ideas and learn from one another. My only concern was that I knew very little about operating a Blackboard LMS. Truly, I had my work cut out for me.

I began my journey of discovery by meeting with our new school principal, who had just started in July. My first meeting with him was to discuss ways in which we could create a culture around the Common Core implementation at our school. As the English Language Arts Department Chair, I had a vested interest in ensuring that *all* teachers were on board with content literacy throughout our building. He asked that I put together a task force of people who knew about Common Core and invite them to meet together before the school year commenced.

When we met, we discussed the importance of initiating a school-wide literacy program, which we called “D.R.A.W.,” an acronym for “Discussion, Reading, and Writing.” This was to be a school-wide literacy program that would support teachers’ efforts to embrace the Common Core curriculum in all classrooms across the school. English Language Arts and Math teachers had a brand new curriculum to learn, and Science and Social Studies teachers had to quickly grasp the College and Career Readiness Standards. Hence, everyone was beginning the school year at a slight disadvantage and certain uneasiness. However, I knew in the back of my mind, if we were able to implement Blackboard as an instrument for change, we would start the year on the right track.

About a week later, as a result of our meeting, my principal called me and offered me the position of Academic Coach for our building. This, coupled with my idea for Blackboard implementation school-wide, was serendipitous! What a perfect combination! Becoming an Academic Coach allowed me the time to invest in designing a Griffin Middle School-specific Blackboard platform that would not only support collaboration and cross-curricular interconnectedness, as originally planned, but it would also allow for many other academic accoutrements that developed over time.

My next endeavor was to meet with the District Online Learning Specialist to train in how to use Blackboard. My learning curve was extensive as I learned how to populate the various Blackboard pages with Common Core resources, Data Team wikis for collaboration, D.R.A.W. resources and strategies, and so much more. My training with the district Online Learning Specialist was just one day, but my work was just beginning. Throughout the year, I would need additional counseling from my Blackboard guru, but I grew in my knowledge and skills as the year zoomed by. The process of creating the pages and the layers of information was painstaking and ongoing throughout the year, but the results have proven to be helpful to teachers, and ultimately beneficial to students. Below are some of the pages I have designed in Blackboard with an explanation of what resides within the many layers of those pages.

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| Table 1  *Griffin Middle School’s Blackboard Pages and Contents* | |
| Page | Content |
| Blackboard HELP Section | Contains the Site Map of Blackboard Shell and a variety of Screencasts to assist teachers in becoming familiar with how to navigate the Blackboard shell. |
| Announcements | This is the “home page” for our teachers. When I post announcements, they are posted on Blackboard and automatically sent to each teacher’s email |
| From Dr. Trach’s Desk | Contains any updates or information from the Principal. |
| *Generation iY* Book Study | Contains groupings for our faculty book study and a place for each group to interact on a wiki. |
| Coach’s Corner | This is where great strategies are posted that might be of help to most everyone. Currently the following items are posted:   * Excellent website regarding discipline issues in the classroom—has a bunch of solutions to typical classroom management problems right at your fingertips. * 12 Essential Verbs—Vocabulary every teacher needs to know and teach his/her students! Great for testing preparation. * Five important ideas about Common Core for all Teachers * Article about Close Reading * Online strategies for instruction |
| D.R.A.W. Initiative | Contains all the information that teachers need to know about our D.R.A.W. initiative, including leveled articles that can be used during literacy lessons   * Teacher Feature: A monthly recap of all the GREAT things that are going on at GMS in classrooms. You might be featured, so check it out! * Literacy Strategies for all Content Areas * Math Articles specifically for D.R.A.W. from Dina Griffin * Science Leveled articles for D.R.A.W. lessons * Great articles that pertain to literacy across all content disciplines * Select “DRAW days” per content area * DRAW “Need to Know” information   + DRAW lesson plan (mock up)   + DRAW grading rubric   + Classroom Expectations |
| Common Core Information | Contains a resource center by grade level and subject area which houses articles, unit plans, lesson plans, and strategies to excel with Common Core. This information has been extracted from various states as we all share the available information with one another. The layout of this “page” looks like this:   * Addressing Major Transitions   + Six “shifts” from GPS to Common Core   + Resources for Teacher Teams (professional development) * College and Career Readiness Standards Continuum * Assessment Information by Content Area   + Implementation of PARCC Testing Schedule   + Defining “College Ready” * Resources by Content Area (this is where you will find websites for DRAW articles, because DRAW is all about Common Core!)   + Articles related to literacy and other special interests   + Websites containing good articles and information * Constructed Response examples by subject area * Explanation of the gradients of text complexity |
| Data Teams | The Data Team page is very involved. It is to this page that teachers are responsible for posting their lesson plans, as well as recording interactions that take place in the Data Team meetings. This page contains   * Lesson Plan Template * Differentiation Charts for Reading and Writing * Data Team Expectations * Data Teams pages by Grade Level * Data Teams pages by Content Area   + Data Team Agendas page   + Data Team Minutes page   + Lesson Plans page   + Shared Ideas page |
| Model Classroom | This page contains pictures of best practices in classroom expectations which administrators are checking on a regular basis during classroom walk-throughs. There are pictures of cool classrooms which excel at meeting the basic expectations of having:   * + Workshop Models   + Rituals and Routines   + Word Walls |
| GMS Teacher Information | Contains basic, yet extensive information which every teacher in our building needs to have access to.   * CRCT Testing information * Griffin School Calendar * Forms * Various procedures * Substitute information * Field trip information |
| Building Leadership Meeting Minutes | Contains the meeting minutes of our Building Leadership, which meets every other week. Teachers who do NOT attend the Building Leadership meetings can have ready access to the discussions that take place during the meetings to ensure a great deal of transparency. |
| Cool iPad Apps | This page contains many educational iPad apps so that teachers with iPads can click on an icon and learn about the app. |
| CARE Committee | We have a CARE committee that our teachers can join which entitles them to recognition for birthdays, anniversaries, deaths in the family, and the like. CARE uses Blackboard to distribute newsletters, and to disseminate other pertinent information to the staff. |
| Media Center | The Media Center page features information that teachers need to know in the way of access codes and log-ins, information about Cobb Virtual Library, student log-in instructions, and Computer lab/cart sign ups. |

The second phase for Creation of an Online Learning Management System for our school was Professional Development. It was a challenge, but I devised a plan to meet with all the teachers and train them on the Blackboard technology. Interestingly, in Cobb County it seems the high schools use Blackboard more than the middle and elementary schools. Therefore, very few teachers knew about Blackboard prior to the training we held for them. So with the District Online Learning Specialist, I commenced to train teachers as soon as school got underway. We took a day and trained teachers to the basic Blackboard skills during their planning time, with some follow-up training thereafter. For most teachers, Blackboard was not a difficult technology to learn, but some teachers needed hand-holding. About mid-year, I held another training session for teachers to review how Blackboard had grown from the first part of the year. They were amazed at how immense it had become. Some teachers were overwhelmed by the magnitude of information our Blackboard shell held, and additional follow-up trainings had to be conducted on a one-on-one basis to assist them in understanding how to access information.

As time went by and teachers began to acclimatize to using Blackboard regularly, great things began to happen with our students. We began seeing consistency in all content areas, and we saw that consistency reflected in how students were thinking in class and performing. By March, I was ready to take this wonderful combination of technology and academics out of our building and present it to others. I wrote a proposal for the Georgia Council of Teachers of English to present at their annual conference and I was accepted! I also got invited to present at Cobb’s “Teachers Leading Cobb” Conference just last month. It was amazing how people came up afterwards and wanted to know more about what I did. We even set up a “classroom” in Blackboard for visitors to experience some of the applications we have implemented at our school. My Capstone has not only benefited Griffin Middle School, it is benefiting other schools within our district and other districts in our state as well.

**Deviations from the Original Plan**

It is not that I deviated from the original Capstone plan; it is more like the original plan morphed into something much bigger and much more involved than I expected. Originally, I envisioned Blackboard as a way for teachers to share information, collaborate about lessons, discuss interdisciplinary planning ideas, and develop a culture around Common Core. After all, I had learned about the advantages of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): increased collective and individual efficacy, collective responsibility for student learning, reduction in teacher isolation, substantive learning and increased content knowledge, higher morale, greater job satisfaction, and greater teacher retention rates (AISR, 1998). As illustrated in the table above, however, it became much more than just a place to communicate ideas. Our Online Learning Management System transformed from being an idea in my mind to a living, thriving learning community of teachers and administrators—a place in which we could all come together to share a common purpose and a common vision:  increased academic achievement using practical, available technology. It was no longer just a place to share ideas. It became an essential vehicle to gather resources for our school-wide literacy program, to learn more about Common Core, to collaborate with others, and to monitor one another for teaching excellence. This Learning Management System became a full-blown learning and resource community for our school.

Another deviation from the plan was the way teachers perceived Blackboard. It was a harder sell than I originally had predicted it would be. Teachers are creatures of habit, and introducing a new technology at the beginning of a school year proved to be a little more than most teachers wanted. So I found myself promoting Blackboard every chance I got. I worked hard to explain to teachers how, once they understood how to navigate in Blackboard, that this technology would make their lives so much easier. My mid-year evaluative survey proved that my efforts did not go unnoticed. 65% of the teachers reported that they wanted more training on Blackboard. It was evident that they had seen the advantages of using Blackboard by this time.

**Outcomes**

Overall, the implementation of Blackboard technology benefited Griffin Middle School in myriad ways. Students benefited by enjoying cutting edge curriculum and instruction which was facilitated by the plethora of resources teachers accessed on Blackboard. Student benchmark scores mid-year exceeded district averages. This was a first in Griffin history. Our eighth grade students increased their writing scores by 2% and showed growth in every domain. Our preliminary CRCT scores reflect gains in every content area: 2.1% growth in ELA, 2.0% growth in Math, 6.9% growth in Science, and 9.5% growth in Social Studies. Of particular interest is the growth in Science and Social Studies achievement. This is directly attributable to the literacy focus we had this school year, and our online learning and resource community was the springboard for our entire literacy program. These results speak highly of the impact this technology implementation had on students.

Teachers also grew to appreciate our newfound online learning and resource community as the year passed by. In the final survey of the year, 81% of our teaching faculty responded. Of the teachers who responded, 60% stated that they felt this online learning community was helpful to them during the school year. 63% felt that it helped them in their job responsibilities. 44% stated that our online learning and resource community helped them to better collaborate with their colleagues, an area of growth for the coming year. However 66% stated that they would be willing to use this online learning and resource community to communicate with their vertical teams (Efaw, 2012). These surveys have been helpful in setting goals for the coming year in what needs to be done to improve upon this incredible tool. Overall, teachers are receptive. But there is room to grow.

**Evaluation and Reflection**

After a full year of implementation, it is apparent that we have many improvements that can be attributed to the implementation of our current online learning and resource technology and its usage. First, this next year, I will do more frequent trainings in Blackboard technology. From some of the survey responses I read, it is evident that teachers do not have the time to spend perusing the many layers of our online community. They need to be told how to get to resources and they need to be reminded repeatedly. Several faculty trainings throughout the year were not enough. I will need to do more, perhaps on a smaller scale, for example in data team meetings or during planning times.

Another issue we ran into this past year is that our bandwidth with the district is not large enough to accommodate Blackboard quickly. Dissatisfied teachers expressed frustration at how slow our Blackboard can be. This is something that is out of my hands, but I have shared these concerns with the District Online Learning Specialist and she has passed it on. I would say that this is the most common complaint about Blackboard, and I wish it was something I could correct.

Our administration was totally on board with utilizing Blackboard technology. My new principal came from a Cobb County high school, so he was already accustomed to using Blackboard. This program would not have had the rate of success it did without our administrative support. The administrators quickly learned how convenient it was to be able to monitor teachers via Blackboard. I even had an administrator admit that he enjoyed perusing his teachers’ lesson plans after he had put his child to bed, and in the comfort of his recliner at home. Because administrators stood behind this implementation, we were able to use Blackboard for many more applications than I had originally planned.

**Moving Forward**

This coming year, we will continue to improve our use of Blackboard and our online learning and resource community at Griffin Middle School. I will add to the information we currently have, by researching and posting more resources, and by modifying all of the Griffin-specific information to reflect a new year with new teachers. We will also utilize our online community even more for collaborative efforts. We will have to, because this year, many of our teachers will not have common planning as we have enjoyed in past years. Budget cuts required that a number of teachers teach multiple subjects and multiple grade levels. Because of this, meeting to collaborate will become virtually impossible without the use of Blackboard. So I expect our interdisciplinary dialogue, our data team dialogue, and our subject area dialogue to increase on Blackboard. Wikis are already in place to accommodate this collaboration. All we need are teachers to begin the process.

I would also like to devise a way to manage student behavior issues on Blackboard. In the past, we have used triplicate forms that often get lost in the shuffle, to manage student behavior. This is not working in our building the way it is currently set up. So I want to implement an excel spreadsheet of each student separated by pods, and have these posted on Blackboard. Teachers will then be responsible for documenting behavior infractions on Blackboard and others teachers will see these infractions in real time. All will be documented online, so no records will be lost. This is definitely going to be a focus this next year with Blackboard.

Some other ideas that I have for moving forward involve the following:

* Posting “best practices” videos of our own teachers sharing ideas for classroom management, behavior management, teaching strategies, etc.
* Sharing ideas with other schools
* Implementing a “Suggestion Box” for new and innovative ideas for school improvement
* Videotaping professional development trainings so teachers who miss them can tune in
* Developing a reflection area to share “tweet-like messages like words of encouragement, celebrations, and other positive things that happen.
* Virtual meetings

Exciting days lie ahead with our Blackboard technology at Griffin, and I am thrilled to be the technology leader who made it happen. I attribute a great deal of my professional success to KSU’s Department of Instructional Technology. I have gained knowledge and skills I did not possess before, and I am more confident and inspired as a result.

References

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