

Blackboard in the Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF)

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Mr.Brett Milliner / Mr.Travis Cote

◆ Biodata

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◆ Introduction

The internet-based learning management system (LMS) known globally as Blackboard (Bb), is an educational management framework at the forefront of online education and web-based course development. The Bb system adopted by Tamagawa University is "used by more than 20,000 organizations and more than 20 million users" (Blackboard Inc., 2014). Tamagawa University students and faculty are fortunate to have open access to one of the world's leading edge educational software systems and one used by a colossal community of educators, researchers, administrators and students around the globe. With the establishment of the Center for English as a lingua franca (CELF) in April 2014, the CELF faculty and students are the latest community of users at Tamagawa University to employ this powerful, 21st century online educational platform.

At Tamagawa University, thousands of students from across more than 15 departments, including the new Center for ELF, engage with the Blackboard LMS continuously; in class and out of class, by day and by night, on trains and on foot. Faculty in the CELF create, assemble and deliver to students multimedia resources to complement and enrich the teaching-learning experience with the click of a mouse or the tap of a tablet. In addition to a diversity of materials to explore, learning tools to exploit and various mediums to collaborate and communicate through, the CELF students are learning and applying valuable 21st century digital literacy skills. This article will share how the CELF students, staff, and faculty - both full and part-time - are

engaging with, operating and implementing the Blackboard system to enhance the modern educational environment at Tamagawa.

◆ The Tamagawa ELF Program

Piloted in 2012, the English as a lingua franca (ELF) Program aims to teach English in a way that emphasizes the use and functions of English. English as a lingua franca is "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). In ELF classes, English is the medium of communication between students who speak Japanese and teachers whose first languages vary. Following the 2012 pilot with 436 first-year students in three departments, the ELF program rapidly expanded to become the Center for English as a lingua franca (CELF) in 2014 and is currently responsible for teaching 1800 students from five colleges. A further three colleges and approximately 1000 more students will be joining the program in 2015. This enlarging community of students and teachers presents a variety of challenges to both the Center and the ELF program. Most of the teaching faculty are first-time Blackboard users, yet cross-department comparisons reveal that the ELF program's teachers and classes have recorded the highest usage rates of the Blackboard learning management system at Tamagawa. In addition, two members (Brett Milliner and Travis Cote) of the full-time ELF faculty received nominations for exceptional course design and course leadership for the 2014 International Blackboard Awards.

◆ Blackboard and the ELF Program

The CELF staff, faculty and students are using Bb to facilitate administrative functions, manage the ELF classes, and support learning within the ELF program. The following report

is a description of the various Bb applications and tools generally being used across the program and also a brief introduction into how two full-time faculty members in the Center are leveraging the Blackboard platform and its various digital tools for a technology-enhanced, 21st century teaching and learning experience.

① Administrative support

The Bb learning management system allows the CELF staff to fulfill a variety of administrative tasks and responsibilities reliably and efficiently. In fact, a number of pages or groups have been established within the system to facilitate specific administrative and curricular tasks and to reach particular users and communities within the ELF program.

② The CELF Working Group page

The Working Group page is where the CELF full-time faculty and administrative staff collaborate behind the scenes. All Center administrative duties, affairs, and responsibilities are posted, discussed and shared on the Working Group page. These include: weekly faculty meeting agendas, records of minutes taken during meetings;



CELF Working Group page

sharing administrative or university documents; a photo album of all Center activities; ongoing faculty research; and, announcements of class cancellations. In addition, the Working Group page serves to support the full-time faculty and staff as

they refine the curriculum and further the development and evolution of the Center for English as a lingua franca.

② CELF Student Group page

CELF full-time faculty and staff are able to maintain contact with the entire ELF student body on the Students Group page. Information about the ELF program, curriculum, the tutor service, TOEIC test dates and various study abroad events are just a few examples of the information accessible by students. All ELF teachers have access to this information, allowing them to use this page to distribute announcements to students and to keep everyone informed about various student and academic affairs. A key application of the Students Group page is for the dissemination of the end-of-semester student questionnaires (see image below); entirely online and conveniently accessible using either a PC, tablet or smartphone.



CELF Student Group page

③ CELF Teachers Group page

A key tenet of the ELF Center has always been the conviction that it is the teachers who ultimately determine the quality and success of our language program. We believe that easily accessible, two-way channels of communication are crucial in conveying the Center's vision, program goals, and as a platform for the sharing of information and resources. Making use of these channels, and the collaborative tools offered by Bb,

allows us to align staff with curricular goals, encourage input for program refinement and provide effective classroom support for our teachers.



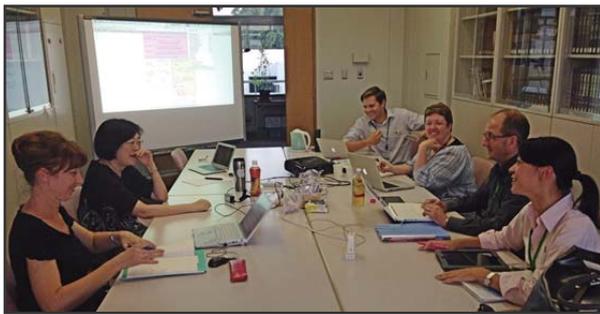
CELF Teachers Group page

With these objectives in mind, the Teachers Group page was created to share information and resources relating to the ELF curriculum and to convey program goals. CELF full-time faculty, for example, use the ELF Program Guidebook when orienting new staff members to both the English program and the ELF curriculum. At the classroom level, all MP3 audio files, videos and textbook resources are accessible from this page, including teacher's manuals. As a result, teachers are connected to the various multimedia and printable materials without the need for physical CD's or textbooks, and teachers can conveniently stage listening activities from their personal computers and the classroom's A/V system. In addition to formal textbook resources, teachers are also assembling a digital "toolbox" - supplementary resources for colleagues to use in their ELF classroom. An ELF teachers' blog has been established for teachers to engage in discussion and share information. What's more, the CELF tutor service is managed within this group. Tutors are required to access the tutor link within the group to complete an online log chronicling each individual ELF tutoring session, and also to consult information pertaining to

tutor responsibilities. The Teachers Group page has become an important resource not just for day-to-day classroom applications, but also for the program coordinators and curriculum designers.

⑤ ELF Blackboard Workshop

As mentioned earlier, a majority of the ELF teaching staff are both new to Tamagawa University and first-time Blackboard users. The ELF working group team decided that Blackboard workshops (image below) would need to be staged to introduce the Bb LMS to the new teachers, familiarize them with the many tools offered and suggest ways the teachers might use Blackboard in their classes.



ELF Blackboard Workshop

Since the start of the ELF Program, four Blackboard workshops have been staged yearly for new teaching staff. The one hour workshops were led by Travis Cote and Brett Milliner and held over the course of two days to accommodate both Monday/Wednesday teachers and Tuesday/Friday teachers. Attendance for the workshops has been very high and post-workshop feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Thirteen part-time teachers attended the Bb workshops in 2013 and when asked if the workshop was beneficial, twelve responded “yes”. In fact, when compared to other departments on campus, the ELF teachers had the highest adoption and usage rates of the Blackboard system at Tamagawa.

◆ Applications Used in the ELF 301 Classroom: Brett Milliner

The main Blackboard functions I use in my ELF 301 classes are: the Class Blog, Grade Center, Tests and Announcements.

① Blog

To get my students into the habit of writing in English, I ask them to write two blog entries every week (about 500-words in length). Students also engage in online communication in English through the comment function found in the blog. As the blog can be seen by all class members, I feel it helps make students more accountable for their work, and more importantly, it encourages students to work harder on their homework because it is being read by their classmates. I believe that through the regularity of posting, my students are becoming used to writing and communicating in English in an online environment. Moreover, students feel a sense of accomplishment in that they have written close to 7500 words by the end of the semester. Apart from the pedagogic benefits, the blog is easy to check on my smartphone while commuting and the user log data clearly identifies which students are doing their work effectively.

② Grade Center

The second tool I use is the Grade Center. All students in the ELF program undertake a wide variety of assessments and the grade center application is a wonderful way to manage students’ scores. I also choose to make the scores public with my class, hence students are able to check in on their grades at anytime during the semester. This function is appreciated by the students who are concerned with their GPA, and it can serve to motivate students to try harder in

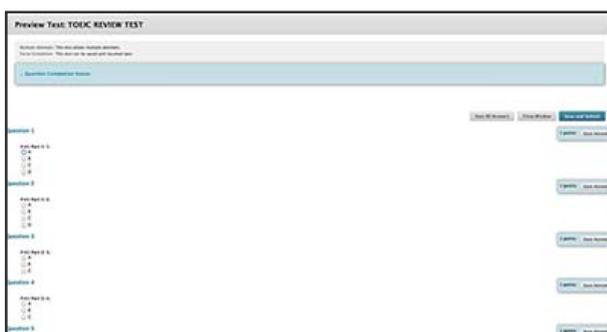
assessments later in the semester, and it eliminates any claims from students about unfairness with grades.



Grade Center

③ Tests

I find the test function to be very useful in reducing my marking and the wasting of class time to check textbook or test answers. Although it takes some time to create an excel file for programming a Bb based test, the amount of time saved easily makes up for this tedious work. Another time saving measure is the fact that the results are funneled straight into the grade center for the class. Students also appreciate using the test function because they can conveniently answer the test questions on their smartphones and the test provides instant feedback or grades for their work.



Tests

④ Announcements

Apart from the email function, which allows me to contact my students individually, I use the Announcements function to communicate with my classes. After every class I write a class report that summarizes the class' content and I introduce

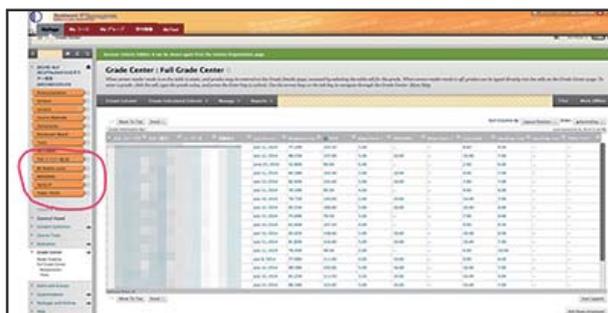
the homework tasks. I also program the announcement to be published with an email of the announcement being sent to students. This information can be useful for students who wish to review the class or those who were absent who will need information about their homework tasks. It may also remind students to get started on their homework!

⑤ Customization



Embedded Program (Quizlet)

I also like the degree to which I can customize my class' Blackboard page. Within my announcement page I also embed vocabulary study activities which are generated by Quizlet <www.quizlet.com>. The screenshot above illustrates how a vocabulary quiz has been embedded into the class' announcements page (see Milliner, 2013 for a detailed description of Quizlet). I also use the mashups function to embed video and audio content for students to use in class or at home. I am able to add links to external websites and I can customize the navigation bar to include the information I want my students to access regularly .



Customize the "Navigation Bar"

◆ Applications Used in the ELF 201 Classroom: Travis Cote

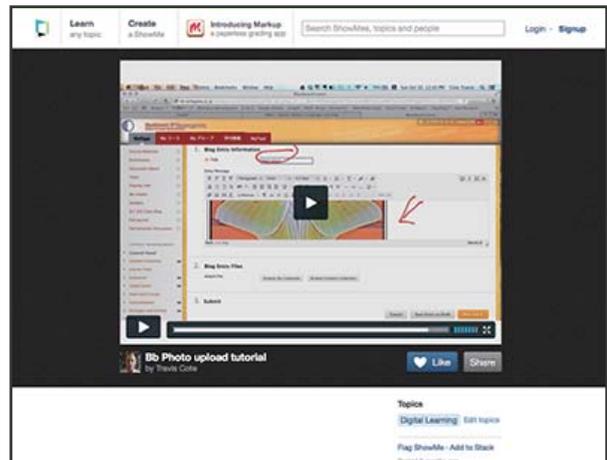
I make it clear to my students at the start of the academic year that not only will I be using the Bb extensively to post announcements and deliver content material, but also that I expect them to make substantial use of it and become well-versed with the tools and functions.

The Bb tools and functions I most often use are: Announcements, Blogs, Journals, Course Materials, Email, and Grade Center. Like most teachers, I use the Announcements tool quite often to share notices or campus information and also to remind classes about upcoming assignments. I particularly like the option of 'immediately sharing' any announcement knowing that an email will be automatically sent to each student enrolled in the course.

① Course Blog

Because face-to-face communication with my classes using English is limited to 200 minutes per/week, the blog plays a crucial role in our weekly interaction and our efforts to communicate with each other in English. Teachers have the option to make the blog "individual" (between student and teacher) or "course" (open to all members) and I have always used the course setting because I believe the students need to communicate in English with each other, not just with the teacher. The class blog is operational on the first day of my classes and although a significant amount of time is required to train the students how to post to the blog, I feel the time invested is not only worthwhile but beneficial in teaching the students 21st century technology skills. As is often the case, many students need a short review of blog posting instructions and specifically, the process of attaching a photo to a blog post. With that in mind, I created a 5-minute,

step-by-step tutorial video of the process and that video is uploaded to our Bb class page.



Instruction Movie

I require each student to submit two blog posts per/week, for a total of 30 blog posts by the end of the semester. I don't demand perfect spelling or grammar, only that the students make an effort to express themselves using typed English. Students are allowed to post on any topics and I encourage them to attach photos and comment on each other's postings.



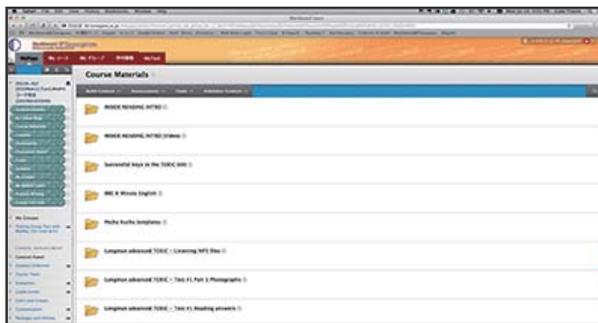
Blog

In addition, this semester I started a second blog devoted specifically to the students' paragraph and essay assignments as a type of "showcase". Once the final draft of a written assignment has been submitted to me, I upload the piece to the blog and invite students to read the essays or paragraphs and leave comments

② Course Materials

Although it's not a default tool in the

Blackboard repertoire, all courses in the ELF program are set up with a Course Materials button. All textbook-related teacher's manuals, answer keys and MP3/ audio files are uploaded to each individual course under this link at the start of the semester. In addition, each teacher is free to upload other resources or content materials they wish to share with their students. I usually supplement these pre-loaded items with a variety of resources including useful websites for English language learners, information about presentations, extra TOEIC drills and Powerpoint templates



Course Materials

③ Grade Center

The Grade Center is another feature of Blackboard that I use substantially and like many other Bb tools and functions, the default settings are basic and simple. Of all the tools highlighted here, the Grade Center perhaps requires the most pre-planning and time investment to set up properly. However, once sufficiently configured and operational, the Grade Center can be a teacher's best friend. Almost all (see ELF 301 Classroom: Brett Milliner, above) assessment scores and grades must be entered manually by the teacher into their corresponding columns, but all calculations and weighting of scores is done automatically. What's more, the teacher can choose to make certain scores or assessment results 'unavailable' to students. It should be noted that the Grade Center

appears as 'My Grades' to the students and an individual student can only see his or her own grades.

◆ English Speaking Society (E.S.S.)

Bb Group: Travis Cote

Earlier this year, Travis Cote was appointed faculty representative for the English Speaking Society club at Tamagawa and got permission to open a Bb Group page for E.S.S. The E.S.S. members meet twice weekly to practice English, discuss current events and debate controversial issues. Now, with a Bb group page, the members have started a blog, an online discussion forum and created an administrative folder to record the weekly meetings and minutes. In addition, they've added a calendar tool so all members can see important dates or plan future events. All members of the E.S.S. have "assistant" privileges which means they can post announcements, edit the design and layout of the pages, post new discussions, add to the calendar or edit the blog .



E.S.S. Group Page

◆ Conclusion

Although most of the current faculty are new to Tamagawa, the ELF program and the Blackboard learning management system, the progress made by the ELF Center training the new teachers is very encouraging. In fact, evidence of Bb adoption and utilization by the CELF teachers in the last two years is the highest in Tamagawa. Looking ahead,

some CELF staff have been testing Bb mobile applications, which will allow students and teachers to interact with the Bb on their smartphones or tablet devices. This will add a new dimension to the way Bb can be used and exploited for language learning purposes. In order to continue to learn more and develop our personal approach to Bb, we want to strengthen our networks with e-learning staff, Blackboard Japan, and other universities who use the Blackboard system. We are also planning more Blackboard workshops in the CELF as a place not only to train teachers, but also as an opportunity for teachers to share and discuss how they are using the Bb to augment their teaching syllabus. We are confident that as the teachers' experience and skills grow using Bb and 21st century digital

tools to support their teaching, the quality of language education offered by the Center will continue to improve and enhance the contemporary educational environment at Tamagawa University.

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