Paperless Assessment via VLE: the Pros and the Cons

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The aim of this short paper is to share our experience of paperless assessment using the submission facility provided in the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

An important part of a tutor's work is monitoring and assessing students' work on modules of study, in order to measure progress and attainment. Assessment may be continuous throughout the module to help students progress by providing feedback on their learning, or it may be a final summative examination to measure attainment at the end of the module. Most modules make use of a combination of the two types of assessment.

In the Research and Information Technology Skills (RITS) module in Salford Business School, we have endeavoured to use the Blackboard VLE to manage a portfolio of continuous assessment exercises and a final summative examination. This Level 1 module comprises activities to develop Information Communication Technology (ICT) and research skills, and is an important foundation for new students, both to encourage good study habits and to ensure that a minimum level of expertise in skills is achieved. Student numbers on this module were about 40 this year.

The continuous assessment takes the form of a series of six portfolio exercises, covering topics such as using email, MS Word and Excel, reflection on group working, using Command Prompt and XHTML web page development. With the exception of the email exercise, all of the students' work was submitted through the Blackboard Assignment Manager. Initially, the tutor sets up the submission facility for the students to upload their work but then can choose one of two ways of preparing and processing the submitted work:

• The tutor can download all of the submitted work into a single folder, which can be copied to a CD and taken away for marking, with grades subsequently being uploaded to the Blackboard Assignment Manager

• Each piece of work can be opened in Blackboard, marked and feedback for the student typed directly into the submission form.

In this module the end of semester examination is also submitted online. The examination consists of two parts, firstly students must answer a series of multiple choice questions presented using the Questionmark Perception software and secondly, they are required to produce a Word document, which is finally submitted in Blackboard.
The Questionmark Perception software is linked into Blackboard, so that when the students have completed the test, they submit their answers and their grade is returned to them immediately, at the same time as being posted to the Blackboard Assignment Manager. The prepared Word document is uploaded using Blackboard's submission facility. Since this part of the examination has to be marked and graded by the tutor in the same way as the continuous assessment exercises students do not receive their grade immediately.

Our experience of using Blackboard to support continuous assessment suggests a number of possible administrative benefits:

• The students do not need to print out their work to hand in at the office

• The submission date and time is clearly saved with the work

• Students can see their grade as they logon to Blackboard, along with the files they have submitted and subsequent feedback from the tutor.

Having used Blackboard to administer summative examinations, our experience again suggests that benefits may accrue to both staff and students from:

• The students receiving an immediate grade for the multiple choice question part of the examination

• The opportunity to provide typed rather than handwritten answers, as would be the case under traditional examination arrangements

Whilst there may be tangible benefits in conducting assessment via Blackboard in this way it is however, important to note that there are a number of issues to be considered which are not generally encountered in paper-based assessment completion and submission:

• Blackboard does not automatically email a message confirming the submission of the work, yet students can access their submitted work at any time after submission;

• Tutors may have to negotiate errors in the submission process, for instance when a student omits to press the final 'Submit' button when they have finished their work. Fortunately, there are ways of working around such errors but they all create additional work for the tutor;

• Unusual file corruption problems can occur, where students' work becomes unreadable – a problem which is not encountered in paper-based assignment submission

• A range of unpredictable errors can arise when students do not follow the submission instructions

• Students whose keyboard skills are not well developed may be disadvantaged in comparison with traditional examination conditions;

• Although the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment is becoming a popular resource for students and staff, the technical support for this is not available on a 24/7 basis this means that assignment submission deadlines can be compromised as a result of technical failures;

Anecdotally, our experience of using the Blackboard VLE for continuous assessment shows that the need for paper submissions can be eliminated, the process for grading work is more streamlined, and students do seem to appreciate the speed and quality of feedback afforded by online processes. The examination only required the printed instructions in hard copy, and students were pleased to receive part of the examination grade immediately. Although there are some drawbacks many of these will be minimised by greater familiarity with this innovative form of assessment on the part of both students and tutors.