


[Home](#)
[Course Catalog](#)
[How Online Learning Works](#)
[Student Services](#)
[Instructors](#)
[Special Offers](#)
[About Us](#)

Search for course, subject, school, and/or format:


[Instructor Start Page](#)
[Enroll Now](#)
[Help/Contact Us](#)
[Site Map](#)

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[Instructor Community Home](#)
[Prospective Instructors](#)
[Instructor Training Program](#)
[Teaching Resources](#)
[News & Interviews](#)

CURRENT INSTRUCTORS

[Discussion Forum](#)
[Handbook](#)
[Professional Development](#)

PERSONAL START PAGE

[Login](#)


"Contrary to the view that an electronic format is limiting, I feel that it enhances the learning environment. It encourages meaningful dialog between students and provides a greater opportunity for us to learn not only from the instructor but from one another as well. Because the students are adults, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience among all participants. "

-Candace Rigsby, Temple, TX



10 Tips for Managing Larger Classes Online in Blackboard



For online classes of 20 to 30 students (or even a very active class of 15 to 20), course design and classroom management techniques can help you accommodate more students while maintaining quality and a high level of participation. Here are 10 tips for managing larger classes:

1. Design, design, design!

Redesign your course from the beginning with the target number of students in mind. It's much more difficult trying to add on or change approaches once the course has started.

2. Set clear expectations

Use your syllabus to manage student expectations about your response time for individual email and define student participation so that students know they are rewarded for quality as well as minimum number of postings, and as much for their responses to classmates as to you. When appropriate, set limits as to how long students' posting should be (i.e. no more than 2-3 paragraphs). Ask students to not post messages that say, "yes, I agree," or "good idea." These messages take up space, take time to open (especially for those using modem access), and don't contribute to the discussion. Instead, if a student wishes to show agreement or give positive feedback to a classmate, he/she should add some substantial commentary with the message. For example, the student can state why he/she agrees or giving an example. Tie this requirement to the participation grade to help ensure students comply.

3. Make a solid start

During the first week, greet students by name either individually or by including several in one posting and engage as many as possible in discussion, but after that, don't feel that you must respond to each and every posting in the classroom. If you initiate most of the topic threads, and students reply to the topic threads, you will be able to respond to the conversation at critical junctures, and help drive it forward. Injecting follow-up questions, and responses that address a whole portion of the thread rather than only individual postings within the thread will both stimulate participation as well as encourage

interaction among students. Although you will certainly want to respond to questions directed at you, responding to each and every posting in the classroom tends to make students interact with you alone, rather than the class as a whole.

4. Be visible in your online classroom

Make frequent appearances in the classroom, every day or every other day, rather than concentrating all your activity into a few weekly work sessions. Do read all postings, even though you will not need to respond to all. This will allow you to keep up with discussions, and when you do post, your messages are more likely to be on target. Logging in frequently and answering a few messages per day will ensure that unread messages don't build up. Tell your students to do the same.

5. Divert separate email correspondence into the shared classroom venue

- Create FAQs or an ongoing question and answer forum so that all students may read the answers to recurrent questions.
- Compliment students on any emailed observations and suggest or request permission to share these within the shared classroom space. Gently request that students ask the same question in the classroom forum if you feel the question and answer would be helpful to all.
- Refer all technical and administrative issues to course managers and tech support.
- Post weekly updates of activities, issues, and any corrections to the syllabus for the week ahead. This eliminates many individual inquiries and gives students a feeling that you are guiding their progress.

6. Organize your discussions to accommodate high levels of activity

Effective management of the classroom begins with discussion forum and thread organization. If you have too few discussion fora, you will end up feeling overwhelmed by the large number of messages stacked up in each area and you will have difficulty discerning the individual discussion threads. Many instructors find it useful to create a forum for each week of the course. If a particular week has lots of activities and topics, you might want to divide the weekly forum up into two, allowing one for discussion topics and another for posting assignments, for example. In addition to weekly fora, create an introductions forum and a separate forum for Q & A.

In Blackboard, you initiate the fora and topic threads but can permit students to create threads as well. Consider this option carefully if you have a large class and it is a very active discussion-based course. Many students will automatically create new threads rather than reply to threads, and this can make discussions unfocused or result in lots of "orphaned" threads. You can uncheck the option at the forum level and not permit students to initiate threads in a particular forum. If you do this, let students know this by adding the fact to the description of the forum (e.g., "The instructor has created a number of topic threads for this forum. Students will not be able to initiate threads in this area.") If you decide to do this in all your fora, make sure that students know that they can still initiate threads in another forum such as a lounge, café or Q & A area.

Make sure that you are initiating a good number of the topics yourself. When you create the topic threads, remember that creating too many topic areas can

make the subsequent conversation too unfocused, while if you create too few and the thread has many subtopics, it might become difficult for students to follow the conversation. If you have an assignment for students to post plus several topic threads of discussion, all falling within the same week, consider starting a forum for that week's topic threads and a separate forum for that week's assignment postings. This will keep your forum from becoming too crowded with messages.

If you use several discussion questions or topics each week, ask your students to respond to only one or two instead of to all of them. This way, all questions will be answered, but not by everyone. Then students can choose to comment on their classmates' postings. This will limit the length of the threads, but not the depth of the discussions.

If a thread is getting too long, you can post a summative message that will end the conversation, compare, "Excellent responses, Kent, Roy, and Sabrina. You've covered all important aspects of this issue," to "Good ideas have been contributed, who else can add to this list?"

Lock a thread after a certain amount of time has passed. This essentially makes the discussion thread "read-only" so students can read all the existing messages in the thread, but not contribute additional messages. Some instructors use this option so students will be motivated to participate weekly and on time. You can also use the *Archive* feature to remove some of the discussion threads from the forums, yet continue to make them available for your students to read. (If you are not sure how to use these functions, please contact your course manager or someone from the Instructor Development Team).

7. Balance individual and group assignments

Make sure that you have a good balance of individual and group assignments, and consolidate assignments so that tasks and skills demonstrated remain the same but that the number of assignments is reduced. Groups of about four or five students can easily work together on a project in a group threaded discussion workspace in the *Group Pages* area. The *Group Pages* area allows for the privacy of the group, while still permitting the instructor to observe all activity. For the purpose of discussion, larger numbers of students can be assembled in one group, but it is best to keep the group to a maximum of four or five when the students will actually engage in a collaborative assignment. (If you want all students to be able to see the work of each group work, then use the main discussion board to create the group fora, rather than the *Group Pages* area).

Students can also use the group document dropbox area, called *File Exchange*, (also in the *Group Pages* area) to work collaboratively on a document. Examples of group or collaborative assignments are weekly summaries, peer evaluation, small group discussion of an issue and then presentation to the whole class, etc. Student groups can prepare to lead a discussion with the whole class. By having groups present their projects or other work to the entire class, students will have the benefit of the totality of student contributions and you will be able to respond to the group as a whole rather than only to individuals. Consider giving students a rubric to use in peer evaluation (and you may want to grade students on the quality of their evaluations of others) or supply guidelines to summary or discussion groups so that students have some guidance in organizing their group work.

8. Feedback

In giving feedback on assignments, your most detailed responses should be to the first individual assignment and the last or major project. (The former, to establish your baseline standards and help students understand what is expected.)

If students post requests or questions that are particular to them (the discussion wouldn't really benefit the rest of the class), post a short message telling the student you will contact him/her via email to handle his/her specific request. This cuts the thread at that point.

Stagger your assignment due dates to give your students ample time to read and comment on their classmates' postings before the next section of the course begins. For example, make discussion questions due on the third day of the week instead of the last day. This also helps the instructor manage his/her own time since there will be more time available to give feedback on student work before attention is turned to the next subject. Think about adding at least one peer-evaluated assignment or activity to the mix.

9. Set clear guidelines for posting and labeling assignments

Establish clear protocols for replying to messages, starting new threads, and identifying subject lines. If you are asking students to post assignments within the classroom threads or to upload documents to document sharing, make sure that you specify how students should name their topics and/or subject lines. Many students have such a hard time maneuvering online until they get some experience that you will find they do not seem to listen to directions. Of course, this happens in the live classroom too--how many times have you had to refer students to what is plainly spelled out in the syllabus? Online it's even worse. Gently remind students who do not follow your rules for posting and naming assignments via email and reinforce class behavior with an announcement reminder if necessary.

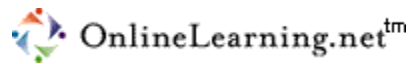
If you are asking students to email assignments to you, make sure that you specify how to label emailed assignments and/or their attachments. Make sure that students not only put the correct label to the email subject line and the attached file, but also in the body of the attachment text itself. This enables you to print out assignments without having to guess later who authored the paper. The same goes for using the *Digital Dropbox* to handle file exchange with students. If you do not intend to use the Digital Dropbox (referred to as the *Student Dropbox* from the student view) to receive assignments from students, it's best to disable it. Otherwise, students may mistakenly send you assignments there and there is no way for you to know, without actually looking, whether you have anything from students awaiting you there or not.

10. Establish an efficient email system

Remember that a class of 20 or more students will potentially generate hundreds of email messages. It is important that you set up some system within your own email program for handling email from the very beginning. If you use the email roster within Blackboard you can check its option to send a "copy of message to self" of your own sent email. However, it is recommended that you put the student's name in the subject line of the email you send, because without this you will only see that you, yourself are the sender and will not be able to easily identify the recipient or sort the messages.

You should create a folder or folders to organize your records of email so that your class materials are not mingled with your other email. You might also

choose to use the *Dropbox* rather than have students email attachments for assignments. Finally, you might want to consider setting up a second email box with your own Internet Service Provider (if this is offered without cost) or obtaining an email account on a free service such as Eudoramail.com or Yahoo.com



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