# Getting Started With . . .
Blackboard Learn Interactive Tools

Research supports the relationship between interpersonal interaction in the online environment and the learning that takes place. When members of an online community direct their efforts toward a common goal, powerful connections are made. Learners can achieve more through in-depth conversations, relationship building, and problem solving in a community. Without a goal, connections, and conversations, there is no community.

In a successful online learning community, students have the right tools for their interactive tasks. Blackboard Learn offers four communication tools for self-reflection, collaboration, and communication. The Discussion Board, Blogs, Journals, and Wikis tools allow you to provide rich assignments and evaluate students in authentic ways where students can share and create knowledge.
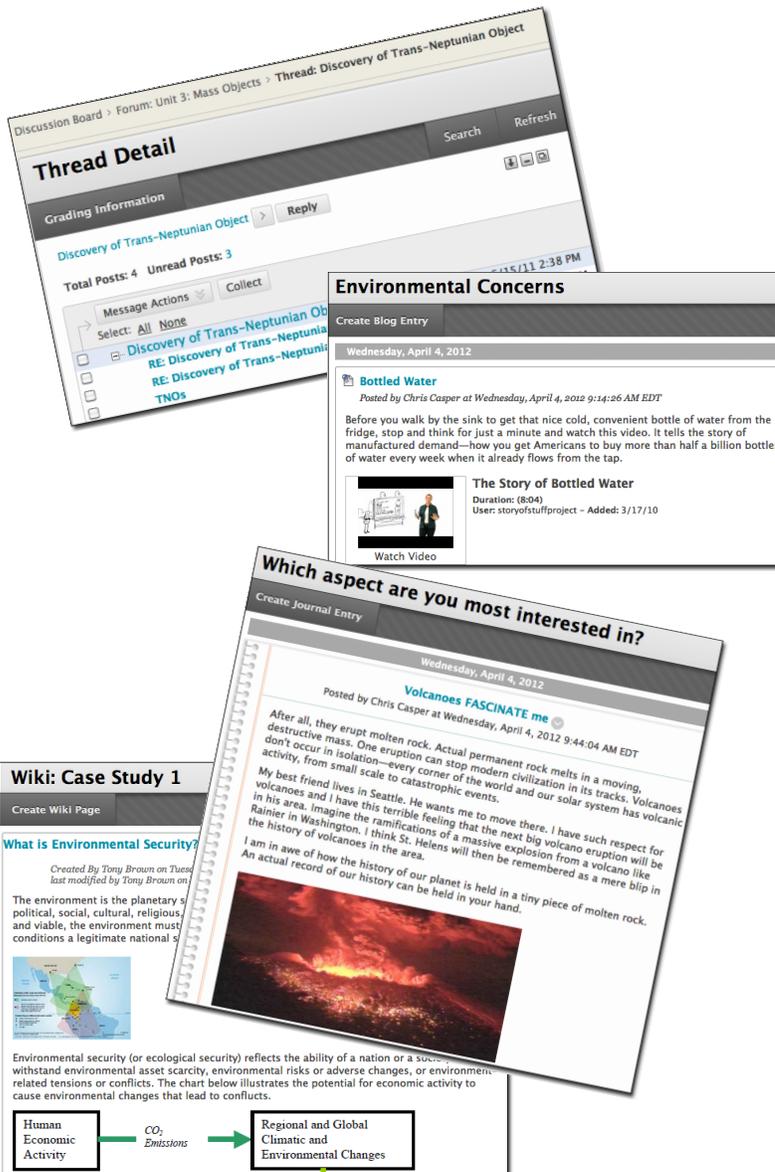
Discussion Board

The Discussion Board often becomes the online classroom. Because students contemplate before posting, more thoughtful conversations evolve. You can observe students demonstrating their grasp of the material, as well as exchanging ideas, debating topics, asking questions, and working in groups. You can moderate, evaluate, and even grade discussion posts. You can also invite subject matter experts to participate in discussion threads.

Blogs

Blogs allow authors to communicate their knowledge and opinions to others. Course members can express their ideas and use feedback from you and their peers to refine their thoughts. Blogs facilitate critical thinking and knowledge construction, and support the development of communication skills in a "public" arena of your course.

Journals

Journals are self-reflective spaces where students post thoughts on experiences or course topics. Journal assignments help students create meaning and internalize learning as they engage in personalized one-on-one conversations with you. The private nature of journals offers students a safe environment to express themselves and receive individualized feedback.

Wikis

Wikis allow students to contribute and modify pages of course-related material in a collaborative area. Students can create new content or edit existing content as well as view revisions and provide comments. As students construct knowledge, the instructor acts as a facilitator instead of the provider of all course content. Unlike a blog, which is more personal, wikis necessitate intense collaboration, as students build upon each other's contributions and refine their final work.

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Each of the four interactive tools serve distinct purposes. You can use one or all of them in your course, and they can work well in combination. Select the tools that meet your course objectives and allow students to interact in the most efficient ways. In the following table, find suggested uses for the tools to help you determine how they could play a role in your course.

Tool	Suggested Use	Level of Interaction	Examples
Discussion Board	Students can express their ideas, gathering feedback and help with refining their opinions and plans.	Medium > replies and related posts from all course members	Post ideas for projects and papers, and ask colleagues to weigh in; share initial thoughts about a topic before it is discussed in-depth in individual blogs; brainstorm ideas for a wiki project; express opinions to help divide students into work groups
Blogs	Students can interpret what they learned, showcase their grasp of the material, and present information to their colleagues. Students often incorporate rich media into their posts to entice and inform others.	Medium > commenting from others	Interpret a case study; submit the final draft of a written, graded assignment; analyze a topic, adding information over several weeks or the entire term; deliver arguments and supporting evidence; provide commentary on a subject
Journals	Students can express their thoughts, questions, and concerns to you privately.	Low > private feedback from the instructor	Ask students to record observations; question the content; identify areas for help; develop a plan for improvement; set goals; evaluate their educational journeys; submit prewriting for a graded assignment for guidance and feedback
Wikis	Sudents can create course content together. Divide students into pairs or groups, or generate work as a class unit. Because each course member is a trusted source of information, everyone may edit and organize the content.	High > intense collaboration through edits and comments	Class summaries and outlines; course glossary; resources repository; lab experiments; group project presentations; research notebooks; connecting student writing to form a book, student solutions for scenarios and case studies; final test reviews

Discussion Board and Wiki in Combination

On the Discussion Board, students post their ideas for a course wiki assignment. As posts develop and ideas are presented, students narrow the topic and divide the work before they transition to the wiki. In the course wiki, students provide text, images, and rich media to support the course content and the topic they chose in the Discussion Board.

Journals and Blogs in Combination

Assign a graded blog where you require students to fully explore a topic, adding entries as the term progresses. However, the initial topic planning begins in the Journals tool where you provide guidance and support. Help students clarify the main points and require initial writing samples before their ideas are posted for the entire class to read and comment on.

Discussion Board and Blogs in Combination

Ask students to post an Internet source on the Discussion Board that expands on the most recent lecture. Next, in their blogs, students can select a source and synthesize that information with the course material, extending their understanding beyond the classroom. Ask all students to provide comments for at least two classmates' entries that include potential test questions.

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Task	What You Need to Know	Steps to Accomplish
Create a Discussion Forum	You can create forums and threads to organize discussions into units or topics relevant to your course. Forum settings allow you to use the Discussion Board in different ways. For example, to control a forum, you create all threads, and moderate and grade the posts. For a student-led discussion, allow students to create new threads with the option of posting anonymously. When creating a forum, you determine whether or not to grade students' posts in forums or threads and how many posts are required before they go into Needs Grading status.	1. On the Course Menu, click the **Tools** link. On the **Tools** page, select **Discussion Board**. -OR- 2. On the **Control Panel**, expand the **Course Tools** section and select **Discussion Board**. 3. On the **Discussion Board** page, click **Create Forum** on the Action Bar. 4. On the **Create Forum** page, type a **Name** and provide instructions or a description in the **Description** text box. 5. Select the appropriate options, such as selecting **Yes** to make the forum available to users. **TIP**: You can create forums ahead of time and set the availability to **No** until the discussion is ready to start. 6. Click **Submit**.
Create a Blog or Journal Topic	In Blackboard Learn, blogs and journals consist of two elements: **Blog and journal entries**: Text, images, links, multimedia, Mashups*, and attachments posted by course members and open for comments. **Comments**: Remarks or responses to blog and journal entries made by others. When you create a blog or journal, you determine whether or not to grade students' entries and specify how many entries are required before they go into Needs Grading status.	1. On the Course Menu, click the **Tools** link. On the **Tools** page, select **Blogs** or **Journals**. -OR- 2. On the **Control Panel**, expand the **Course Tools** section and select **Blogs** or **Journals**. 3. On the **Blogs** or **Journals** listing page, click **Create Blog** or **Create Journal** on the Action Bar. 4. On the **Create Blog/Journal** page, type a **Name** and provide instructions or a description in the **Instructions** text box. 5. Select the appropriate options, such as whether or not to allow users to delete comments they make. 6. Click **Submit**.
Create a Wiki	You create the wikis for course members to use. Then, all course members can create pages, unless you intend to be the sole author and use the wiki as course content. When you create a wiki, you determine whether or not to grade students' wiki contributions and how many page saves are required before they go into Needs Grading status.	1. On the Course Menu, click the **Tools** link. On the **Tools** page, select **Wikis**. -OR- 2. On the **Control Panel**, expand the **Course Tools** section and select **Wikis**. 3. On the **Wikis** listing page, click **Create Wiki** on the Action Bar. 4. On the **Create Wiki** page, type a **Name** and provide instructions or a description in the **Instructions** text box. 5. Select the appropriate options, including whether you will allow course members to edit pages. 6. Click **Submit**.

* A Mashup combines elements from two or more sources. When you view a YouTube™ video in a Blackboard Learn course as part of the course content, you are experiencing a Mashup. Mashups also include Flickr® photos and SlideShare presentations. The Mashup function is available when you create many types of content.

Spotlight on Commenting and Feedback

When you first assign writing in the interactive tools, start by requiring only a few entries or posts throughout your course. Initially, you need to determine how long it takes to respond adequately to all students to make the assignment worthwhile. If you are grading contributions, you also need to allow time to provide comments and add grades.

As you evaluate and comment on students' reflective writing, remember that your goals are to encourage your students to write more, examine their own writing and learning, and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions. One poorly worded comment can stifle a student's desire to continue writing and sharing. Some instructors award credit for completion rather than in-depth grading, while relying on commenting to encourage, suggest, and guide student responses. When students are not worried about performing to a set standard, they may be more likely to convey personal feelings and include more reflection.

Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind as you provide comments:

- Focus on content and ideas rather than grammar and punctuation -OR- alert students ahead of time when the mechanics are part of the grade or feedback.

- Always provide positive comments along with areas needing further work.

- Do not overwhelm students with too many comments.

- Help each student refine the "main point" and how it is supported.

- Make comments that let students know you are a willing audience who looks forward to their writing.

- Focus on what you want students to address in future work.

Build opportunities for revision into graded reflective writing assignments so students can learn from your comments and refine their work. The Blogs, Journals, and Wikis tools offer the ability for students to respond to your comments. This encourages dialogue, allowing students to actively participate in the writing process. Students take on more responsibility as they revise, defend, and rethink. Ultimately, reflecting on their writing, reading comments, and communicating about those comments all contribute to a better understanding of the course material and writing itself.

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