

Working and Communicating with Groups Online

The benefits of collaborative group working have been well documented and include promoting active student participation and responsibility for learning, deepening student understanding and developing independent skills of problem-solving, decision-making and critical thinking.

There are a number of tools within Blackboard Software which can enhance the group working experience by allowing flexible means of communication and collaborative work areas.

This session is intended to introduce you to some of the options available and provide you with both the student and designer perspective of using these tools.

Objectives

By the end of this session participants should be able to:

- ❖ Use the Chat, Discussion and Email communication tools within Blackboard
- ❖ Add Entries to the Calendar
- ❖ Create module announcements
- ❖ Communicate with individuals using the Who's Online feature
- ❖ Use group manager to assign students to groups.
- ❖ Create group activities for students






Communications Tools

Communication Tools can be provided for each course in Blackboard – These are Chat, Discussion and Email. These can be customized to suit your course requirements. If you are not planning to use any of these features, it is a good idea to remove them from the Course Tools area. In addition, announcements can be made to your students which are posted in a central location and the

Who's online feature enables you to communicate with specific individuals who are already logged in to Courses Online.

In order to add any of the communication tools to the Course Tools Menu, click on **manage course** and select **tools** (ensure that you are in **Build** view).

Communication Tools

-  **Announcements**
Post important information in a central location.
-  **Chat**
Chat with other users in the course in real time, or use the Whiteboard to display images.
-  **Discussions**
Post and respond to messages on specific topics.
-  **Mail**
Send messages to other users.
-  **Who's Online**
Chat with other users who are logged in to WebCT.

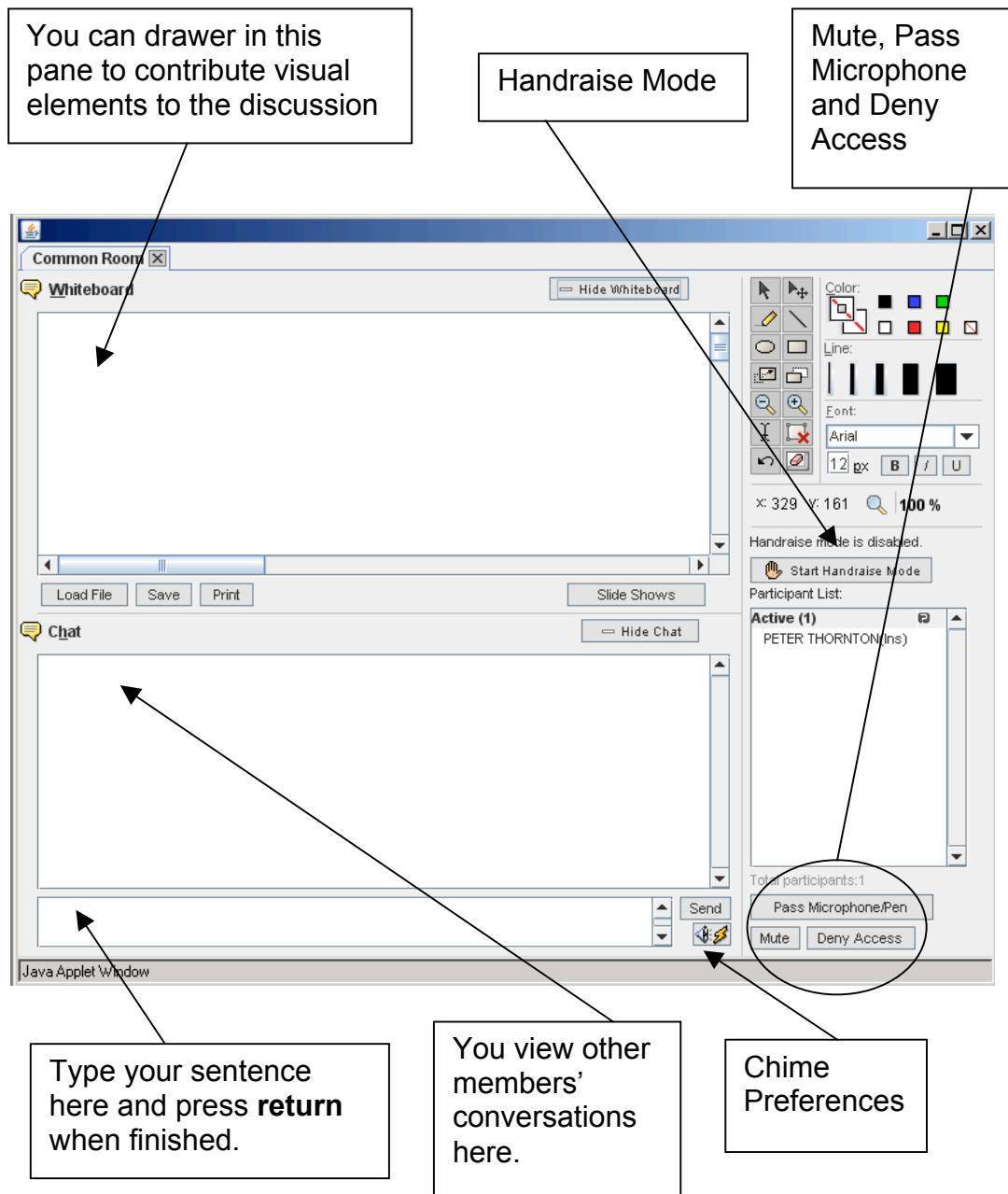


Select the required tools by placing a tick in the appropriate box, scroll down the page and click on Save.

Chat

Chat is a synchronous communication tool requiring participants to all be logged in at the same time so that the conversation happens in “real time”.

In order to access chat rooms, select **Chat** from the **Course Tools Menu** and click on the Chat Room link. After a short interval, the Chat room window will open. The chat room window has various features which enhance the basic chat facility. These include chime preferences, handraise mode, pass the microphone, mute and deny access. **Chime preferences** enable a combination of sounds or flashes on the screen to notify members that another participant has entered the chat room. **Handraise mode** means that students must “raise their hand” in order to be invited to speak by the tutor. The tutor can then click on **Pass the Microphone** to enable the student who raised their hand to speak. The **mute** option prevents a participant from contributing to a conversation; however they can view it, while **Deny Access** will remove a participant from a room.



If you use chat with your students it may be worth setting out some guidelines for “netiquette” when communicating in a chat room.

Setting up a chat room

Once you have enabled Chat on your course tools menu, you are provided with a default chat room called **Common Room**. You can however add further chat rooms by clicking **Create Chat** or **Whiteboard Room** in **Build** view.

Create Chat or Whiteboard Room

*Title:

Description:

Use HTML

Item Visibility: Show Item
 Hide Item

*Maximum users: Maximum users allowed by Server Administrator is 1,000

Type

Chat and Whiteboard
 Chat only
 Whiteboard only

Goals
Associate goals with this chat room.

More Options (Expand this area to see more options.)

* Required field

You can now enter a title and description for the chatroom and choose whether to show or hide it. You can also decide if you want a chatroom and whiteboard, a chatroom only, or a whiteboard only. If you have created Goals (see Adding Learning Materials section), you can choose to link this with them by clicking on **Select Goals**.

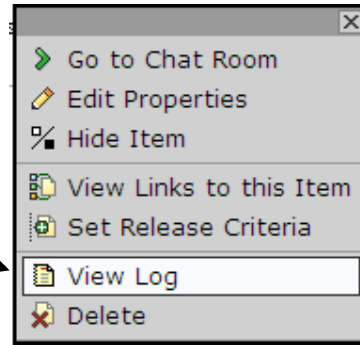
Under more options you can allow users to hide or show chat or whiteboard in a combined room, allow private chat access (individuals chat to other single members by double clicking their name in the participant list), allow students to use an alias for anonymous chat, and maintain a chat room log of all the communications that have taken place (available in teach view).

Editing Chat Room properties

From the chat screen, click on the action links menu next to the chat room and select **Edit Properties**. Make the necessary changes, not forgetting to open the **more options** link to set user permissions before finally clicking **Save**.

Viewing the Chat Room Logs

In Teach Tab, locate the chatroom and click on the action link. Select **View Log**.



Discussion

The discussion tool (also known as a bulletin board) is an asynchronous form of communication which allows participants to log on whenever they want and read messages that others have posted and add their own.

To access the Discussion area from the Homepage (in **Build** view), click on **Discussions** on the course tools menu.

Course Tools

- Course Content
- Assessments
- Assignments
- Discussions**
- Learning Modules
- Web Links

(H) = Hidden from Students

Instructor Tools

- Manage Course
- Assessment Manager
- Assignment Dropbox
- Grade Book
- Group Manager
- Tracking
- Selective Release

Your location: **Discussions**

[Create Topic](#) [Create Category](#)

All Topics (43 Messages / **28 New**) **All My Posts** (7 Messages)

- [Statistical information](#) (6 Messages / **6 New**)
- [Evaluating search tools](#) (3 Messages / **3 New**)
- [Master Documents](#) (0 Messages)
Please upload your completed master document by attaching it to a message posted here.
- [Comparing search tools](#) (6 Messages / **6 New**)
- [Newspaper reporting exercise](#) (6 Messages / **6 New**)
- [Research Topic](#) (19 Messages)
Please compose a new message introducing yourself and stating the subject you wish to study for the purposes of your assessment. research proposal (as an attachment) to your message.
- [Reference Sources](#) (7 Messages / **7 New**)
- [Learning Style Questionnaires](#) (Hidden) (0 Messages)
You should now have your completed learning styles questionnaires returned to you. Some of you may agree with the findings, some of you may not. Please post a message to this discussion board outlining your feelings on the results to your questionnaire. If you feel that they are inaccurate, can you think of reasons why they should be i.e. are there any limitations in the tests, or in the way that they are completed?

Topics

View all messages or new messages.

Categories are used to group discussion topics and can be created by clicking on **Create Category**. Topics are used to group messages and can be created from **Create Topic**. It is not necessary to use categories; topics can be grouped or un-grouped.

Creating Topics

From the discussions screen, click Create Topic. Enter a title, description and select whether you wish to show or hide the topic. There are further options that you can choose before clicking on **Save**.

1. Gradable – Students discussions can be marked and are therefore made gradable.

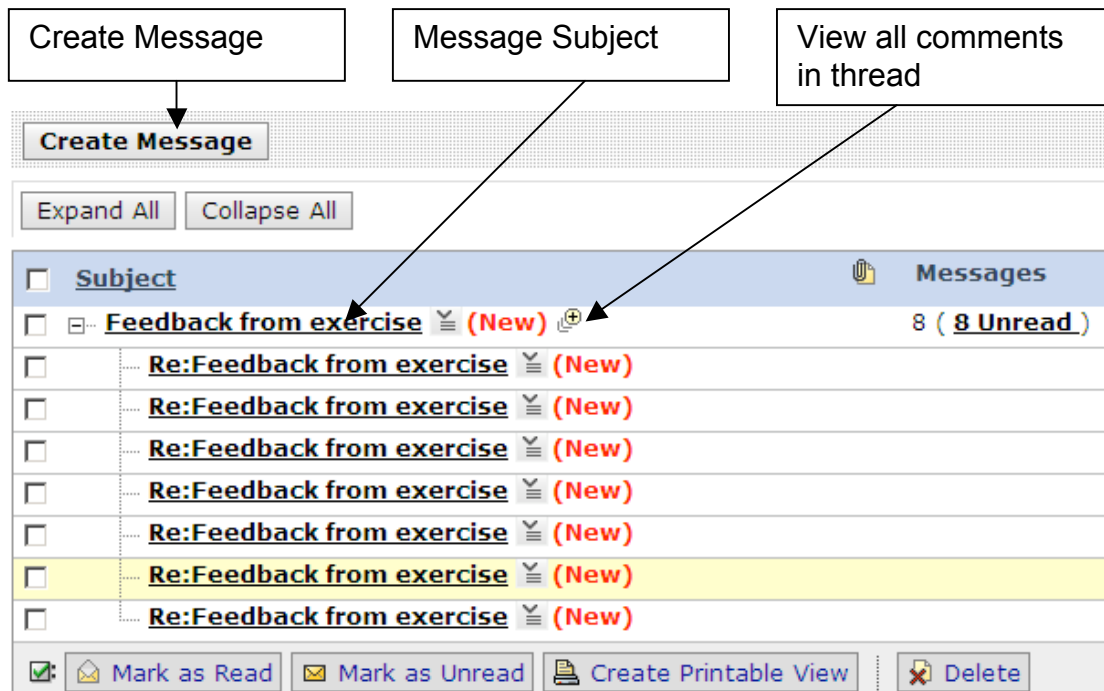
2. Editable Posts – Users can edit their own posts i.e. delete etc.

3. Locked – Users cannot post discussions to locked discussion boards. These are “read only”

4. Anonymous – Posts to the topic will not include the author’s name.

Posting Messages

Click on **Create Message**. Enter a subject title and a message and click on **Post**. To reply to the message, click the message subject and click **reply**.



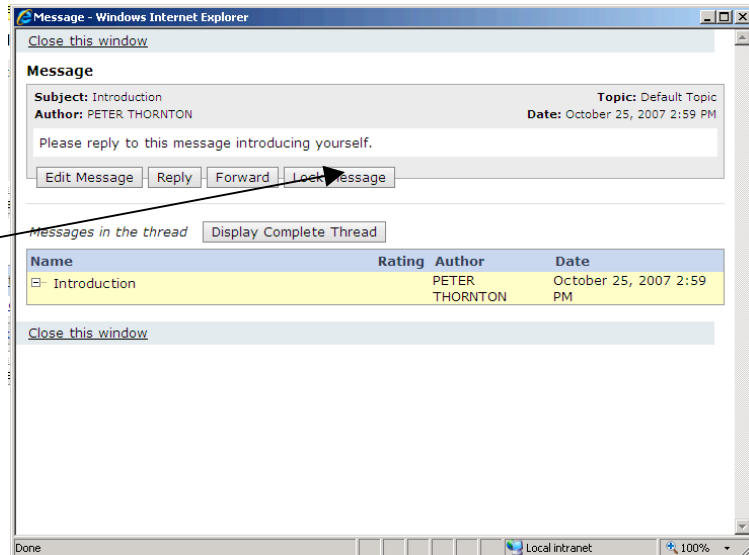
To edit a message, select the message subject and click **edit message**. Please note that students can only edit their posts if the discussion has been set to allow **Editable Posts** in the discussion **properties**.

To print or save a message or messages, select the message(s) you want to print, and click **Create Printable View**. Another pop-up window will appear with the selected messages with the option to **print** or **save as file**.

Locking Discussions

Locking Discussion topics and threads prevents students from posting to the discussion. They are still able to read any existing messages. In order to lock a topic, locate the topic you wish to lock from the discussion screen and select **Edit Properties**. Under **Topic settings**, select **lock this topic** and click **Save**.

In order to lock a message, click on the discussion message that you wish to lock and select **Lock Message**.



Grading Discussions

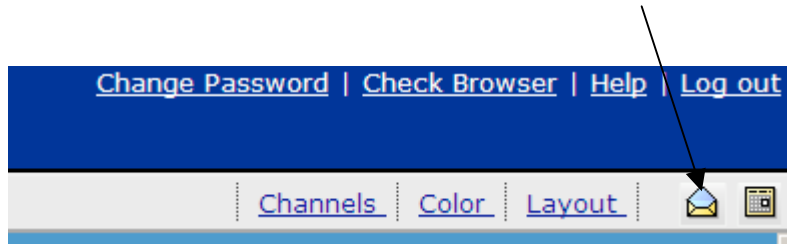
With gradable discussions you can grade the student's participation in the discussion while viewing the individual student's posts, with the option to print or save these posts. Please note you will need to be in **Teach Tab** to use gradable discussions. To grade a discussion topic, locate the topic you wish to grade and from the Actionlinks menu, click **Grade Topic**. This will then show the gradable discussions window where you will be asked to enter the students score.

Click **Save Grades** when all of the scores have been entered.

The results can then be accessed by clicking on the **Grade Book** button in the **Instructor Tools** (in **Teach Tab**).

Mail

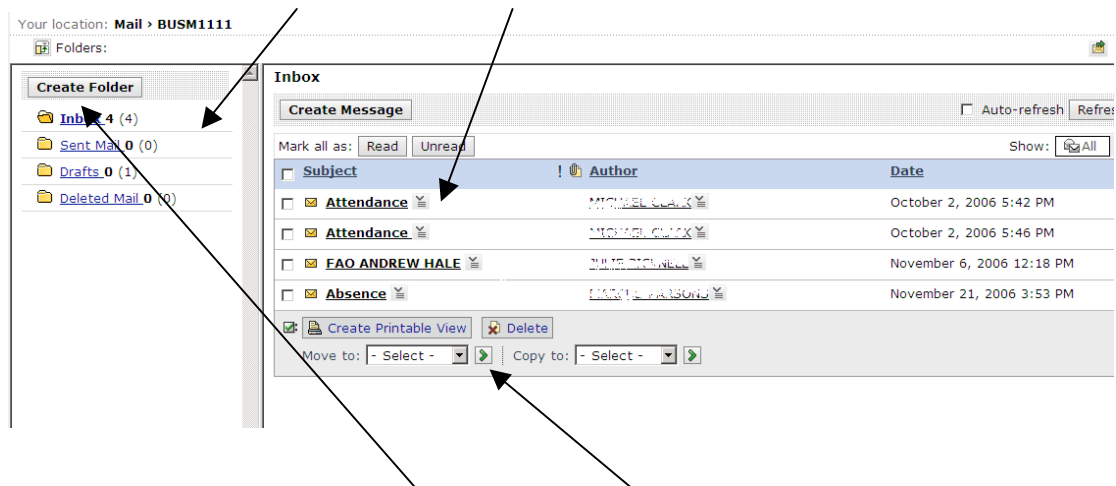
The mail facility in Courses Online uses features which are common to most email systems. The difference with this mail system is that it only provides access to other users who are enrolled on the same module on Courses Online. To access mail from **My Blackboard**, click on the **Mail Icon**.



This will provide you with the full view of all email for the courses on which you are enrolled. Clicking on the appropriate course will take you to the Mail screen for that module.

Alternatively, within each module, you can click on **Mail** on the **Course Tools Menu**.

Folders are listed in the left pane, messages to the right.

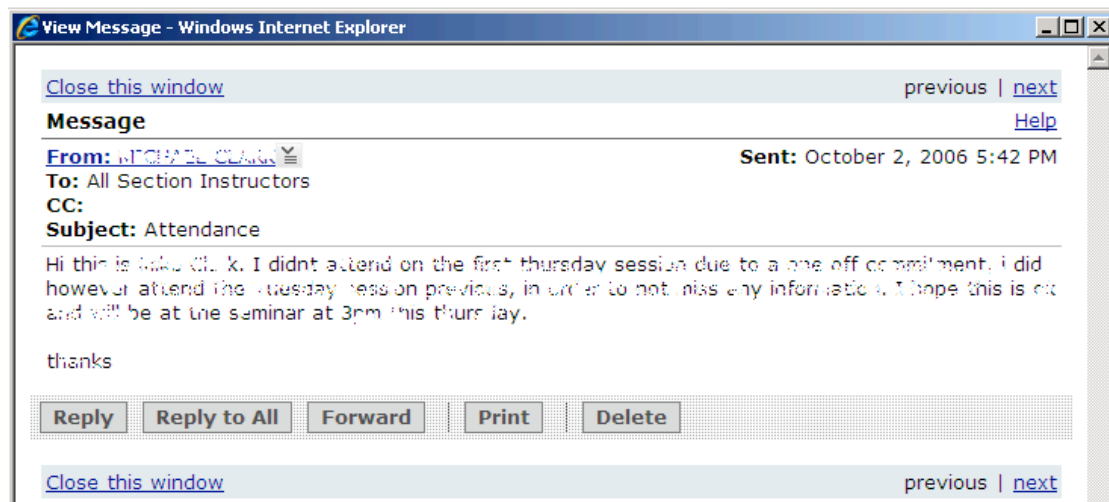


To create another folder click here. To move a message to another folder, place a tick in the box next to the message and click the green arrow next to

Move to or **Copy To**. You can select the appropriate folder from the drop down list.

Reading Mail

To read mail, click on the hyperlinked subject heading. The email will open in a separate window.



Once you have read your email, you have the usual options to **reply**, **reply to all**, **forward**, **print** and **delete**.

Creating a Message

In mail, click **Create Message**. A new window will open.

To select the relevant person(s), click on **Browse for Recipients**. If you wish to create a simple text message, type your message here.

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "Create Message - Windows Internet Explorer". The form contains the following elements:

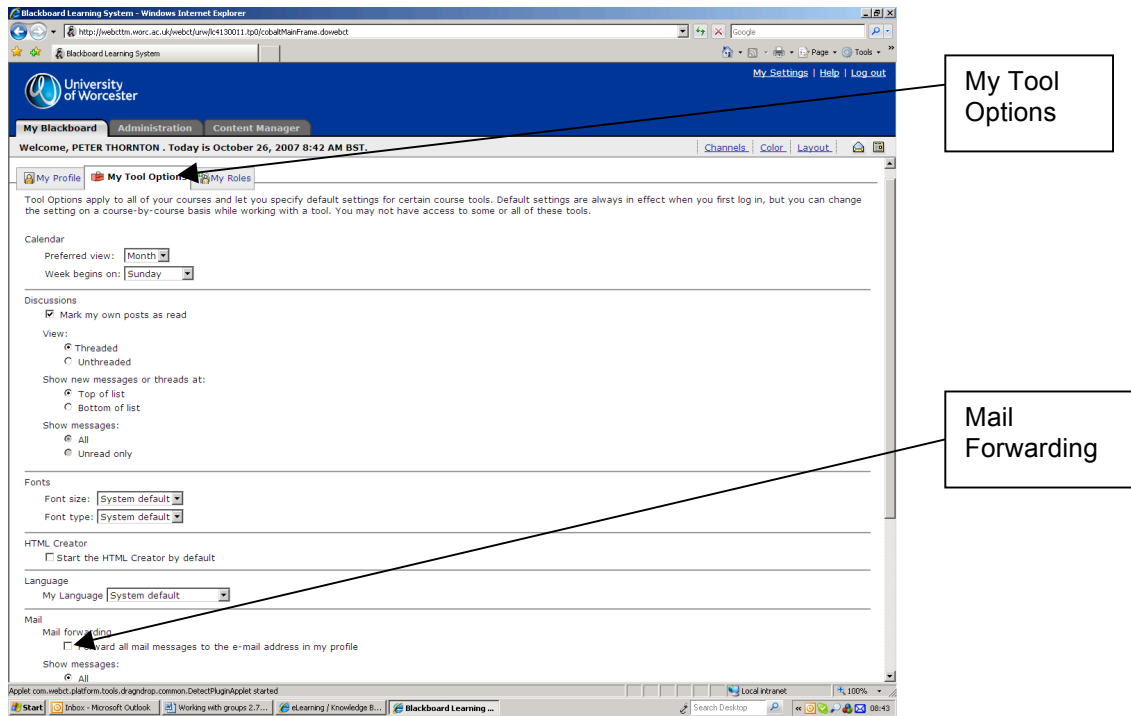
- A "Browse for Recipients..." button at the top.
- Fields for "*To:", "CC:", "BCC:", and "*Subject:".
- A large text area for the message body, with a "High priority" checkbox to its right.
- "HTML Creator" radio buttons for "On" and "Off".
- A "Use HTML" checkbox and an "Insert equation: New" dropdown menu.
- An "Attachments" section with an "Add Attachments" button.
- A row of buttons: "Send", "Preview", "Cancel", and "Save as Draft".
- A red asterisk and the text "* Required field" at the bottom left.

If you wish to use enhanced editing similar to that of a word processor, turn the HTML Creator **On**.

You can also add attachments by clicking here. The familiar content browser window will appear.

Mail Forwarding

It is possible to auto-forward your mail from your Blackboard Modules to another email account. In **My Blackboard**, click on **My Settings** and select the **My Tool Option** Tab. You can then select **Forward all email messages to the email address in my profile**.

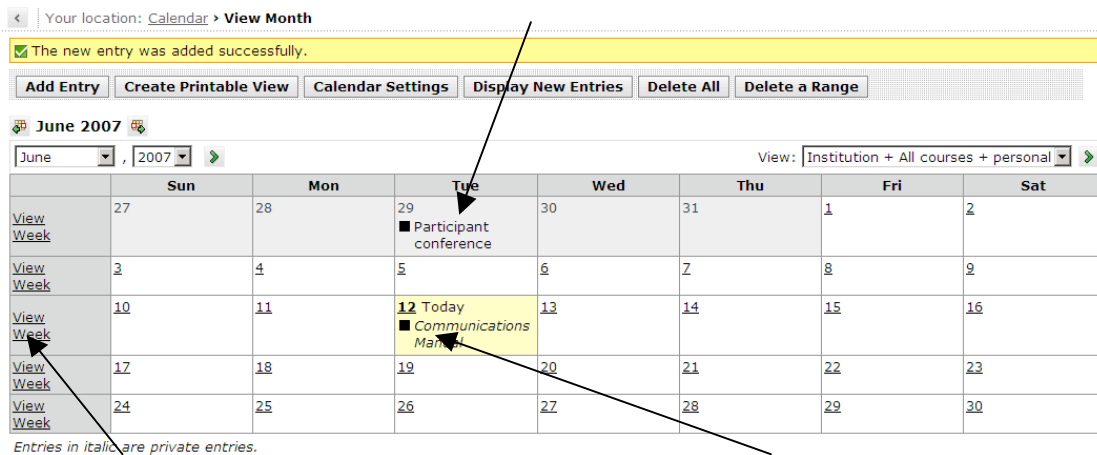


Calendar

Using the Calendar

The calendar allows students and tutors to create and view schedules. The calendar uses two types of entry. Course entries can be created that are either public (viewable by everyone on the module) or private (viewable only in your own calendar).

Public Entry



Select Week View

Private Entry (in italics)

Adding Entries

The screenshot shows the Blackboard Learning System interface in a Windows Internet Explorer browser. The page title is "Blackboard Learning System - Windows Internet Explorer". The URL is "http://webctm.worc.ac.uk/webct/lurw/lc-4130011.tp0/cobaMainFrame.dowebe". The page header includes the University of Worcester logo and navigation links: "My Blackboard | Accessibility | Help | Log out". The main navigation bar has "Build", "Teach", and "Student View" tabs, and the user is identified as "TEST AREA - PETE THORNTON".

The left sidebar contains "Course Tools" and "Designer Tools". The "Course Tools" section includes: Course Content, Announcements, Assessments, Calendar, Chat, Discussions, Goals, Learning Modules, Mail, Roster, Web Links, and Who's Online. The "Designer Tools" section includes: Manage Course, File Manager, Grading Forms, and Selective Release.

The main content area is titled "Your location: Calendar > View Month". Below this is the "Calendar" tool interface. It has buttons for "Add Entry", "Create Printable View", "Calendar Settings", "Display New Entries", "Delete All", and "Delete a Range". There are tabs for "Month", "Week", and "Day", and a "View: This course only" dropdown menu. The calendar is for "October 2007".

	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
View Week	30	1	2	3	4	5	6
View Week	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
View Week	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
View Week	21	22	23	24	25	26 Today quiz 1 Don't forget to do the quiz more...	27
View Week	28	29	30	31	1	2	3

Below the calendar table, it says "Entries in italic are private entries."

The bottom of the browser window shows the taskbar with several open applications: Start, Inbox - Microsoft Outlook, Working with groups 2.7..., eLearning / Knowledge B..., and Blackboard Learning ... The system tray shows the search desktop, local intranet, and the time 08:55.

You can add Public or Private Entries by clicking on the **Add Entry** button. Once the essential title has been input, a description is optional and then the start and end dates can be set. Under **More Options** it is possible to link the calendar entry directly to another area of Courses Online i.e. the entry could read "Don't forget to submit your assignment", which would then link the student through to the assignment box. Alternatively the entry can be linked to an external url. Recurring entries can also be added so that they display every day or every week for instance. Click **Save** to add the entry to the calendar.

Who's Online

This facility enables users to chat with others who are logged into a course at the same time. It is similar to some other forms of “messenger” software currently used for online communication.

Your location: **Who's Online**

Who's Online

My Status:

Number of users online in PETE THORNTON : 1

Name	Role	Available	Online Since
<input type="checkbox"/> PETER THORNTON	Section Designer , Section Instructor	Yes	October 26, 2007

Inviting Members to Chat

Users can invite others to chat by clicking **Send Chat Invitation**. A pop up screen will then appear asking you to type an invitation message. Once you have done this click **Send**. Your request will then appear on the “distant” desktop. If they choose to accept, a “Chat” window will appear.

You can also set your status to **visible/available**, **visible/unavailable** and **invisible**. When you have set your status from the drop down arrow, click **Update**.

Your location: **Who's Online**

My Status:

Number of u... HORNTON : 1

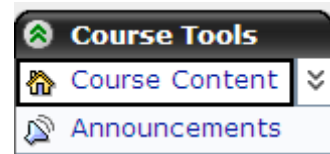
Name	Role
<input type="checkbox"/> PETER THORNTON	Section Designer , Section Instructor

Announcements

The announcements tool enables tutors to create and store all module announcements in one location for easy access by students. In addition, the announcements can be delivered as pop-up messages when a student selects the course from their My blackboard page.

Creating Announcements

Click on announcements in the Course Tools Menu.



You will then see the Create Announcement screen detailing listings of previous enouncements.

Create Announcement			
Order	Title	Post Date	Status
1	Test Message	June 12, 2007 4:44 PM	Sent

Click **Create Announcement**.

Enter a **title** and your **message**.

Select the **recipients** from the list and set your **delivery dates**. N.B. Students are not selected by default. You **MUST** remember to tick the box next to student.

Finally if you wish the message to be delivered as a pop-up, check the box before clicking **Send**.

Your location: [Announcements](#) > **Create Announcement**

Create Announcement

To: PETE THORNTON

*Title:

*Message: HTML Creator On Off

Use HTML

Recipients

*Select the user types that should receive this announcement.

Select All Roles

Section level

Section Instructor

Section Designer

Teaching Assistant

Student

Auditor

Delivery Dates

Start displaying on: , , , ,

Stop displaying on: Never

, , , ,

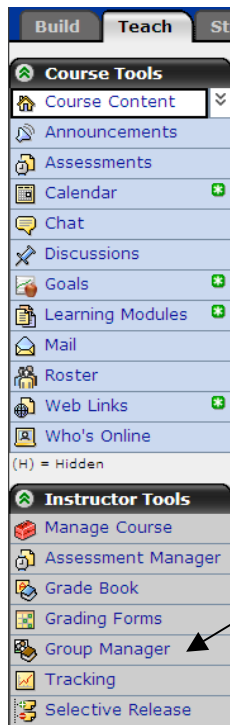
Also deliver as a pop-up message

* Required field

N.B. Once an announcement has been sent, it cannot be edited.

Group Manager

The group manager allows you to place students into groups to allow them to work collaboratively on group assignments. The students can be chosen for



the groups individually or they can be randomly assigned. In addition, students can use a “sign up sheet” that will enable them to sign up to a particular group. Once the groups have been established, the courses online communication tools can be utilised within these groups to facilitate communication i.e. a discussion topic can be created which only members of a particular group will be able to contribute to. The group manager tool is only available within **Teach** Tab.

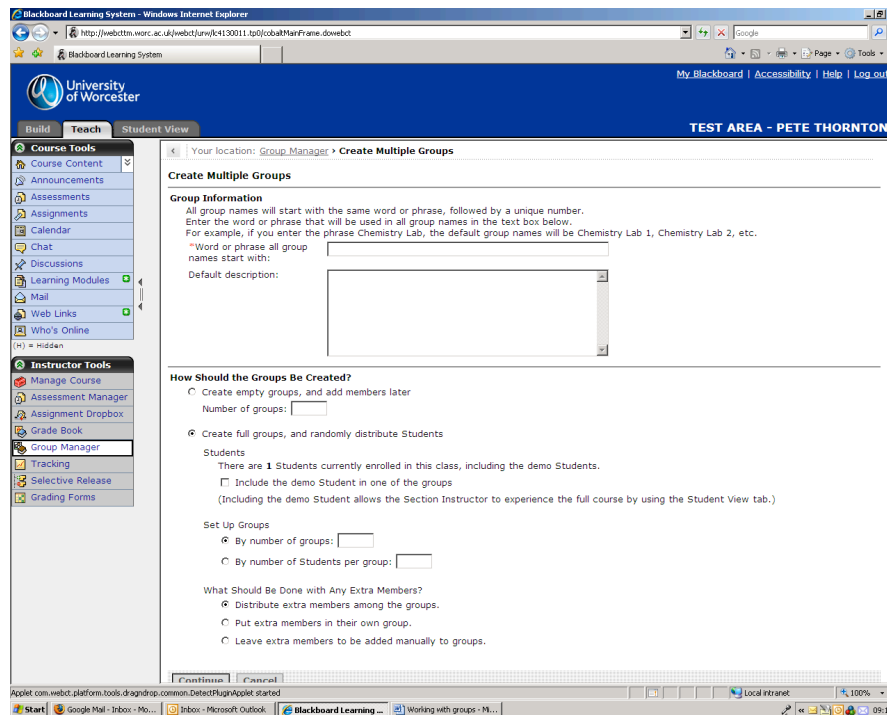
Creating Custom Groups

Custom groups enable the tutor to create specific group names and control the members who are assigned to the groups. Members can be added to the group while it is being created, or they can be added later.

Click on **Group Manager** (from within the **Teach** Tab). From within the Group Manager screen, click **Create Groups**.

The create group screen will appear.

Create Multiple Groups screen, enter the **Word or phrase all group names start with**, and an optional description.



Under **How Should the Groups be Created** you have the option of either creating empty groups and adding the students at a later date, or you can create the groups and randomly assign the students. To add your students at a later date, select **Create Empty Groups and add members later**. Enter the number of groups you wish to create and click **Continue** (ignoring any other options). Click **Save**.

To create groups with randomly selected students, select **Create full groups and randomly distribute students**. Select the appropriate settings for the remaining options and **Continue**.

The **Confirm Created Groups** screen will now appear. You can change the students assigned to groups by clicking **Shuffle Members**. Click **Save** to create the new groups.

Creating Sign-Up Sheets

Students can add themselves to groups using sign up sheets. The tutor controls the maximum size of the group and chooses whether to let students see who else has signed up. To create a sign up sheet, click **Create Groups** (from the Group manager screen). Select **Create Groups with Sign-Up Sheets** and click on **Continue**.

The screenshot shows the Blackboard Learning System interface. The browser title is "Blackboard Learning System - Windows Internet Explorer". The URL is "http://web01m.worc.ac.uk/webct/urwyk/1.20011.tb000a0MarFrame.doweibit". The page header includes "University of Worcester" and "My Blackboard | Accessibility | Help | Log out". The navigation bar shows "Build", "Teach", and "Student View". The main content area is titled "Your location: Group Manager > Create Groups with Sign-Up Sheets".

Create Groups with Sign-Up Sheets

Group Settings

All group names will start with the same word or phrase, followed by a unique number.
Enter the word or phrase that will be used in all group names in the text box below.
For example, if you enter the phrase Chemistry Lab, the default group names will be Chemistry Lab 1, Chemistry Lab 2, etc.

*Number of groups:

*Word or phrase all group names start with:

Default description:

*Maximum Students per group:

Student view: Allow Students who have not yet joined a group to see the names of group members. After Students join a group, they will see a list of group members.

Sign-Up Sheet Settings

Students join a group by clicking a sign-up sheet, which is placed in a folder.

*Sign-up sheet title:

Sign-up sheet instructions:

Place the sign-up sheet link on:

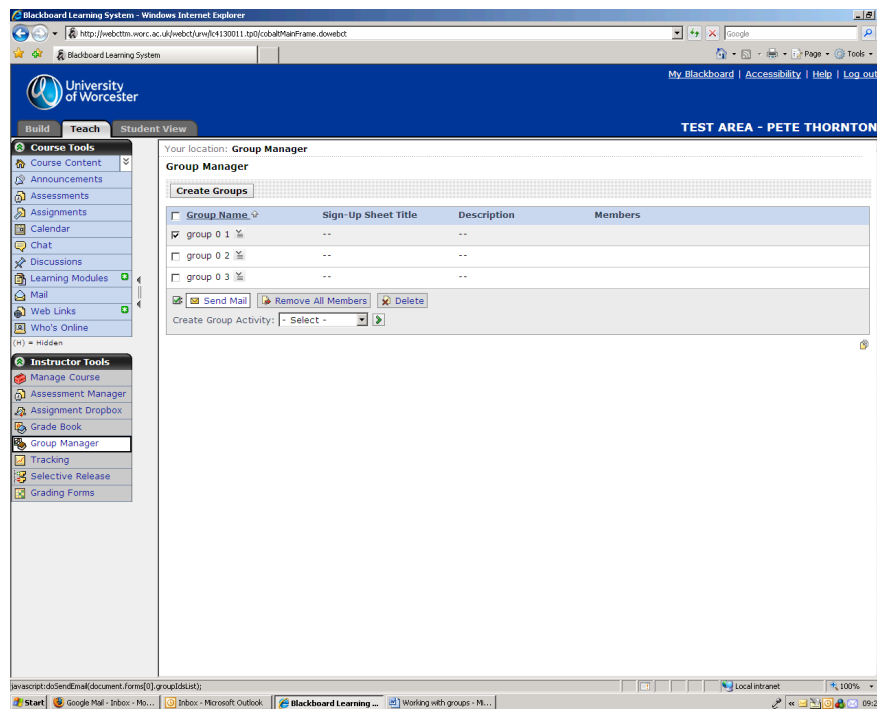
This is where the Students will go to choose the group they want to join.

* Required field

In the Create Groups with Sign-Up Sheets Window, enter the number of groups required, a word or phrase to start the group names with, an optional description and the maximum number of students per group. In addition you can select the tick box to allow students to view member's names before signing up. Now, enter the sign up sheet title and instructions under sign-up sheet settings. Finally, select the folder where you wish to place the sign up sheet and click on **Continue**, and then **Save**.

Sending Mail to Groups

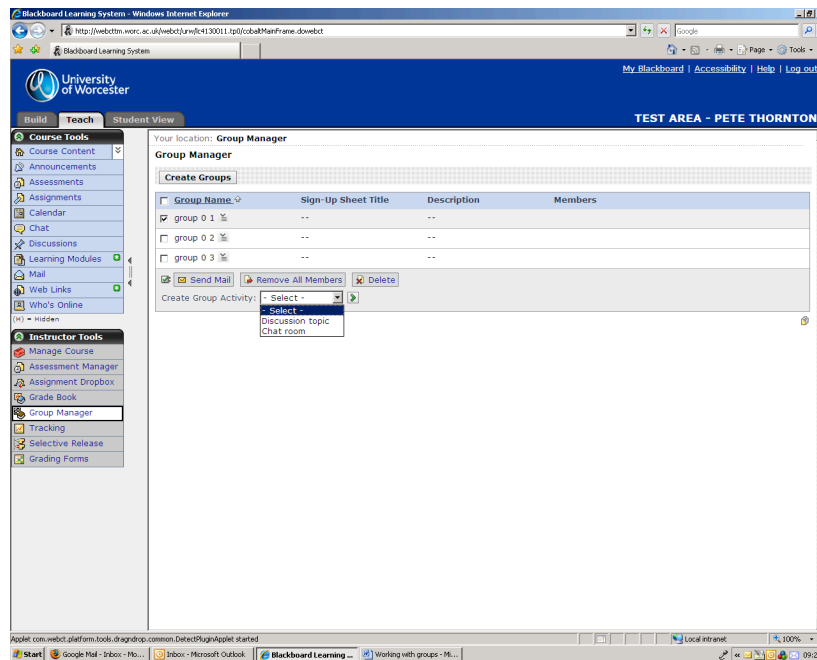
Once groups have been set up, email messages can be sent to all members of those groups from the Courses Online email tool. Messages can also be sent to all members from the Group Manager tool.



In group manager, select the group(s) you want to send a message to and click on **Send Mail**. The Create Message Screen appears with the group members already added to the To: field. Enter a subject, text and add any attachments before clicking on **Send**.

Creating Group Activities

Group activities can be created from the group manager tool and consist of group discussion topics and group chat and whiteboard rooms. To create group activities, select the group(s) from the Group Manager Screen. Click on the drop down box next to Create Group Activity and select either discussion topic of the chat/whiteboard room.



Then click on **Go** (the green arrow). The Create Discussion Topic or Create Chat and Whiteboard Room screen appears. Create the discussion topic or chat/whiteboard and click on **Save**. A confirmation that the group activity has been created will appear.

Summary

This guide has provided you with the basic information you need to begin working with groups in Courses Online. There are many more options available than there has been space to discuss in this guide, however, for more in depth guidance you can use the context-specific help screens in Courses Online by clicking on Help in the main menu. Alternatively, contact the E-learning Team at eos@worc.ac.uk for further guidance or an individual tutorial.