Library Blackboard focus groups: final report

Marc Bragdon

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Library Blackboard is a UNB Libraries project that integrates library research tools and virtual learning environments. Using application bridging technology, we have developed an electronic resource gateway plug-in that delivers course-specific resources through UNB-supported Blackboard course sites.

We decided to run focus groups of undergraduate students to learn more about how UNB's implementation of Blackboard impacts academic work, and how library resources figure into students' study and research habits. Though the immediate goal was to illicit feedback that would be useful to refining our application, the overarching reasons for running focus groups run deeper.

As with any professional or cultural group, librarians have a particular set of biases and it's useful to ask periodically whether these biases stand at cross-purposes with intentions. A good litmus test is whether we are achieving what we set out to. If we aren't reaching students in satisfactory numbers and ways – and ongoing discussions in various committees intimate as much - then why not? And if not, how might we be standing in the way of our own success?

Humans are prone to believing that, when something doesn't work, we should press on and try harder than before, and then we will succeed. There's a popular and overused library mantra that beautifully compliments this belief: if you build it, they will come. Continued relevance has become a matter of building services based on committee decisions, and waiting...and waiting. The approach works fine if you're in the vanguard of change, and if you were ever looking for an indication of whether you are, ask yourself if they are in fact coming.

This litmus test is part of the deeper current that compelled us to reach out to undergraduate students through focus groups. Each librarian seems to have developed a picture of undergraduate students in their current manifestations. What we don't have is their own picture of themselves – or, just as importantly, of us. First, seek to understand, then to be understood. It is in the meshing of understandings that common purposes are realized and new approaches taken.

Lessons in recruitment

Early recruitment for the study proved difficult. Posters offering $25 and a free supper didn't cut it. Practically nobody cared, immersed as students were in a sea of competing advertisements around campus at a time in the semester when looming deadlines outweigh the need for extra beer funds. In mild desperation, I contacted the Student Union's VP Academic Greg Melanson for advice, and he graciously agreed to meet and discuss what the SU might be able to do to help out.

The line I took to the Student Union was that we need to do less talking and more listening to students. The world the typical student inhabits and the worldview they've developed are significantly different than our own. And there's no turning back. We aren't providing them with a future into which they will fit so much as they're giving us a glimpse of what the future they build will be, with or without our help.

Greg said something at the time that struck me: that in meeting with professors and University officials, he got the impression they thought he and his colleagues were simply younger, inevitable versions of their elders - an attitude that said much about its possessors, but little in fact about students.

Receptive to the overture, Greg offered the services of their on-staff graphic designer, space on the SU's Brunswickan page, and even guaranteed campus-wide postering. The resultant poster was far snazzier than mine, and resultant student response sufficient to proceed with the study. The lesson I took from this would recur time and again over the study's course: an offer to help goes much farther when coupled with a willingness to be helped.

The focus groups

The first focus group was conducted in late November, while the second took place in late January of the same academic year. 11 of 12 registrants attended the first one and 10 of 15 the second. Students came from Arts, Engineering, Science, Education, Kinesiology, Business, and Nursing faculties. Nearly all were typical undergraduate age – between 18 and 23. The gender split was more or less 50/50.

Unfortunately no international students came forth as volunteers. Given the significance of findings here, we might want to do something specific for them in subsequent focus groups.

The mood around the table for both groups was relaxed, and the discussions candid. As I had hoped, they spoke as much or more with one another as they did with me.

Discussions were organized around three topics:

- Blackboard as an adjunct to and delivery vehicle for courses;

- the role of the library in supporting research and assignments; and

- the Library Blackboard application.

Discussions for each topic began with first impressions, then proceeded to examples of what has worked and what hasn't worked usage-wise, and finished with suggestions for improvements.

A few overall impressions really stood out:

- Blackboard is unevenly adopted and often poorly leveraged by professors, and students don't know why.

- Items on student wish lists of services that would be useful for research and assignments are nearly all accounted for in existing library services, suggesting issues with how we publicize and/or deliver them.

- Overall impressions of library instruction weren't positive. The most positive comment was something to the effect that sessions are excruciating but ultimately worth it. The majority of the comments were more of the "completely useless" and "there's a [faculty/departmental] librarian?" variety.

- Google is often seen as a better tool for narrowing a topic than library search applications.

Though I encouraged digressions and stressed that discussions were theirs to steer, the 90 minute sessions didn't veer significantly from the predetermined format except in one very important way: it may not have been scientifically germane in the research study context, but I couldn't help answer questions and volunteer information on services and policies they were unaware of. In doing so it was clear that they appreciated the focus group session itself – especially being listened to and having specific needs addressed in a group setting.

More on these impressions, including selected quotations, are included below. I have mostly quoted students verbatim, adding environmental /contextual comments in ( ) and clarifications in [ ] where required.

Blackboard - First impressions

Students very much appreciated Blackboard for providing relevant, often vital course information and content, and, where leveraged, communication facilities with instructors and among classmates.

"Sweet – I don't have to read the textbook. Teachers put their notes directly on it so you don't have to waste time reading a 50 page chapter. It's already summarized. A lot of times they only test on the material that's on there."

"It allows for more preparedness, especially for teachers who prepare ahead of time and put [notes] on before class so that you don't have to copy down everything and miss stuff. I still can't try and figure out what I'm trying to write and always get what they're saying. Not all teachers do this."

"It's a lot easier to check slides and print them off and bring them to class, and just highlight key points and make notes on the side " (much head nodding around the table)

They wonder why some professors choose not to avail themselves of Blackboard. By their estimates, the ratio of Blackboard to non-Blackboard adoption is around 50/50.

"...I do have cases where professors aren't using it, and it seems to me that that's like inexcusable. I had a math prof last semester who didn't use it at all and I thought, ok, its a math course, but I have a math prof this semester who does use it, and he posts all the assignments and questions and syllabus."

"You're getting into unfair advantages and disadvantages with a situation like that. I don't think that's fair. I don't know the fine print, if it's something that is up to profs, but from a student standpoint it's unfair."

There is a general sense among the students that Blackboard isn't living up to its potential in terms of instructor use and technical robustness.   Most features are underutilized or don't deliver as expected.   Even the simplest performance demands can cause problems: opening files served from Blackboard can be problematic as the application often hangs or sends users back to previous workscreens once a file/application is "allowed" to run. Blackboard poorly supports embedded files and doesn't allow them to be externally launched. Some students also reported that online quizzes frequently timeout and submit prematurely.

"I think in general the people that are building Blackboard are trying to push it too hard...people don't update their own java so when they force a java update not everyone's ...you get issues with logging on, getting it to function."

"I just had an assignment I tried to open for an hour because my professor put it in some random place. If professors were more knowledgeable and more educated in what you see or how to use it then it would be a lot more effective."

"Tedious sometimes – try to open up a file and you have to allow the browser to open a file and it'll send you back to the main menu and you have to go through the steps again"

"The Course Tools, I find a lot of the time, out of 5 courses, none of them would have 'specialty links', they only have course content all on one page. The other parts [of Blackboard] are useful but they should be encouraged to use that stuff. [For example] the calendar is important – though it isn't always right – and I find no one really uses it to its full potential."

Despite the glitches, there were many positive reports of use beyond just posting syllabi:

"I took Chinese last semester and one really cool thing is my Chinese prof puts up audio files of words we've learned and we have these files for how to pronounce them. It's worked well."

"I had a prof who would record his lectures and he'd put a file on Blackboard and it would show in iTunes and it would follow the slides."

> "What one class has done, lots of our assignments are lesson plans, so as a class we're posting our own lesson plans so these are all useful lesson plans for us when we start teaching. We do it through email [in other classes] but it doesn't compare to having it all in one place like in Blackboard."

Asked if they had any advice for the Blackboard team and or professors, their overall concern was that professors don't seem to know what they're doing:

> "Templates would be helpful for professors. Is there help for them? (Marc confirms that yes, there are workshops and ongoing support) Use them! (laughter around the table)"
>
> "GO to the workshops."
>
> "If the professors knew how useful it is to students, then they'd want to use it more."

Homework/assignment resources

Most students used the library in one way or another, though often in ways other than those librarians would likely recommend.   Many students initially search in Google (and a small number in GoogleScholar) and then go to e-journals or Quest for holdings. The general sense was that we have a lot of content but search and manipulation are unacceptably difficult. Much of the frustration voiced in reviewing library services – or their lack- was equally frustrating to listen to because we actually provide most of the services they believed would add tremendous value to the library - they just aren't aware of them. Some services, for example, that they would like to see:

- Searching for articles by subject;

- Cross-disciplinary, assignment-specific searching;

- Keeping track of previous search results and articles; and

- Obtaining articles that don't appear directly available

Care for an example of frustrating?

> Student A: "Refworks is great because you submit all your references and output them in whatever format"
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> Marc: "You're actually using RefWorks?"
>
> Student A:"Well...I usually don't because I always have to piece mine together from all over the place. I usually download PDFs onto my computer. That usually saves me from having to go back looking for it. I'll just open a window and forget where it came from. RefWorks seems cool, I just never really took the time."

Student B: "We had a quick info session in 1st year...It sounded so awesome because we have so much journal work, but it was kinda like "Ok, here's how you do it and blablabla and here you go.' It was stressed to us, but holy crap I have no idea what it is. But I use Son of Citation a lot".

Google, as always, is the undergrad's right-hand robot.

"Sometimes using library tools, you have to click all the links and through the sublinks, and with a website it's just there. If I'm searching for journals I hardly ever go through the library, I'll use Google and once I got a hit I'll read the abstract and then go to the library to see if they've got the journal. I only use it to find the journal since you need the subscription."

"...I don't use the library website: it's slower and a lot more picky. Sometimes you have to know exactly what you're looking for and that's why I'm searching: because I don't know what I'm looking for yet."

"Even if I Google something and find a journal, then I'd use the ejournal thing to see if it is available, usually it is. The thing that's hard with searching Science [is] you need to search it through the name of the journal that it's printed in and you don't know what to search on the library website."

Most were unaware of subject guides. All but 2 of the 21 participants were unaware that they had a faculty/departmental librarian.

Marc: "Has anybody here used the subject guides on the website? Has anyone ever clicked on this red link (on the front page)?"

"Different colours scare me"

"We had a workshop on that and I forgot where to find it."

Library Instruction

The few participants who indicated a high level of comfort in using library resources attributed this to library instruction, though the overall impressions on this front were mixed.

"For [my subject area] I made an appointment with the [subject] librarian and [he/she] showed me how to find information and what terms to use, including abbreviations, [he/she] was so knowledgeable about the topic that it was totally worth the hour I spent...I'd totally recommend that."

Marc: "Has anyone else worked with a librarian before?"

"I have but the way they think about it is not how I think about it, I know what you're saying but I'm not going to do it that way. Their way seems slower and I'm comfortable with my way."

Marc: "Have you all hard sessions with librarians (overall yeses). Have they imparted anything that stuck? (several 'no's)"

"I know how to look up journal articles now."

"I remember having a session and wondering what [he/she] was talking about the whole time."

"When you're first introduced to it they explain it in terms like 'you'll get this'. We had to do this library assignment and we all copied off one another because nobody knew where we were supposed to go for anything."

"I had the same thing in a lab and we all just copied off one another. But it's the kind of thing where you just dive into it. I mean, how else are we supposed to learn?"

The following discussion struck me like a lightning bolt between the eyes: was the focus group process itself pointing to a different instructional approach?

"I think the library did well with their session the first year, but it seemed to drone on, and I think a discussion like the one we're having right now – straight to the point: this is what you're gonna want to know, here's some stuff you probably don't know. If you want some more information, here's a pamphlet. We might stem off, just the basics, here's how you find what you're looking for..."

"Definitely find the right person to do it, maybe make it more interesting. For a dry topic, if someone has a little energy and enthusiasm it'll make the topic more interesting for everybody else."

"Or just more interactive – that's part of being dynamic: ' you guys are all here today, what do you really want to know? What can I tell you? How can I help? What are some of the questions you think you're going to have?' There needs to be another approach instead of this, like, 'sit down, this is what I'm going to tell you, I'm going to keep talking about it, and talking about it..." because isn't not going to get through."

"The tricky thing about asking what students want specifically is if they're in first year they might not know...so maybe you need a long drawn-out session."

"But if you're sitting there for an hour lecture, I'd be doodling."

"...I just don't remember it being comprehensive; I was overwhelmed and didn't soak up anything. I learned later on through experience, asking peers, what teachers said, I was never aware of Blackboard sessions or the library stuff. I never really heard about those, so maybe making those more prominent to students."

Library Blackboard

The response to Library Blackboard was very positive. They appreciated that the application directly addressed course-specific needs and, since library services therein appear through Blackboard but operate from a library server, documents and searches can be launched and manipulated externally.

> "I actually think that would be handy because there is often more than one thing I want to look at at one time and Blackboard doesn't like that. So if it were to open in something not in Blackboard that would be a whole lot better. And I find if I even open a PDF in Blackboard it's often a lot slower than if it was coming from somewhere else."

SingleSearch in Library Blackboard caught their attention.

> "I actually really like SingleSearch, that's what I wind up using when I'm on the library website."
>
> "I've never even heard of it."
>
> "I didn't know it was available but I'll probably use it now."
>
> "It was one of those things I came across and tried and actually really like."
>
> "It's a very user friendly thing – you see something you can type into and press go and it actually gives you a little hope."
>
> "Yeah, instead of having to click through indexes and that kind of stuff."

Student-side personalization, whether in Library Blackboard or natively as part of a Blackboard course (which may be available in the WebCT-Blackboard harmonized Blackboard 9/NG upgrades) made the wishlist more than once. For example:

> "It'd be cool to have a tab on there where you could click 'favourites' so people could save links or make notes, so if there's something they're going to be using a lot, if they could add it to their list of 'popular searches' or whatever."
>
> "Like where you have the weblinks (in Library Blackboard), it would be good to have a personal one." (Several students agree.)
>
> "A 'My Articles' or something like that."
>
> "Can you save searches that you do through the library, you can save search results?"
>
> (Marc explains how RefWorks does this, and relates that the 'true Blackboard' version of Blackboard courseware enables plugging in a student-accessible RefWorks module directly into courses.)

Most had more questions than impressions, and these were pretty instructive:

> "That yellow box with a librarian, is that what you mean by 'Faculty librarian'?"
>
> "In terms of the ejournals available, say I were to go to the research journal articles and you choose from a list of topics, sometimes a course overlaps between two fields, then in Blackboard what would be included?"
>
> "What if you had a tab that was specifically 'search' like a Singlesearch?"

"It might be handy to have [SingleSearch] there all the time as a separate option."

In parallel digressions during both focus group sessions, a few students suggested that a Blackboard instance be activated for all courses, even if the only functional part was Library Blackboard:

"Is there any way they're going to get professors to use this – either they're afraid of technology or too stubborn to do it? This sort of thing in the past would have saved me hours but because they didn't...Wouldn't it be possible to use Datatel lookup to populate each course a student is enrolled in with [Library Blackboard] so that even if a prof doesn't have it, the student can access the resource (another student chimes in: "and you could use the Chat"; other students voice agreement)...just provide that you can get to this opening page."

"If they ever get the library resources going (in Blackboard), they should create even blank templates for every course, with this resource available, because having this available is better than nothing....Putting all that stuff in there rather than having it scattered left right and center would make so much more sense..."

"Even this portal seems more user friendly than the library site itself. If I look for something in CS, CS tends to be broad – it can hit different parts of professions – and if I go to something I get too many hits so I go to Google...but here you can go to your specialty, that would make using the library resources so much more attractive than just randomly getting results that you have to dig through."

"I like the idea of the reserve items being right there, instead of having to go to the library website.

Conclusion

At the end of both sessions I couldn't bear to let them go without a brief run-down of some additional functions and services they had expressed a need for beyond what we touched on with Library Blackboard.   I made the biggest impact on them with a brief explanation of how to use GoogleScholar and its Preferences to link directly to UNB-subscribed full text.

I suggested to them that a half hour or hour of their time with a librarian would be well worth it.

The moods at the end of both sessions were very genial and positive, everyone seemed happy and energized by the experience. Pizza, cookies and pop may have played a role, but there's no denying that not a single glazed-over expression was seen at any point.

If the focus group was a litmus test of how well we're serving students up to this point, the evidence here indicates that we fail as or more often than we succeed. Students seem to appreciate our efforts but, as far as they are concerned, we're missing the mark.

> "I see those advertisements (for CoolTools), but if they talked a bit more about [the power of them, what you could really do] I might go, but the way they're worded, I'm not really sure what they're about."

Getting back to the Introduction, how might we be standing in the way of our own success?

The sessions suggested to me that we often attempt to lay the transparency of our own understanding overtop of students' understanding and the match, unsurprisingly, doesn't fit. Do we expect that eventually they'll adjust their transparency to match our own? Is it terribly likely they will become like us?

Without a better understanding of how current students think and operate, without a demonstrated willingness to adjust our thinking and methods, we will continue to fight a losing battle with commercial products that have shaped and been shaped by these very same students. Wouldn't it be worth exploring the possibility that they too should play a part in shaping our services? Isn't this, the perpetual beta otherwise known as t*he present*, the surest path to perpetual relevance?

Resultant Recommendations:

- Student consultation should be incorporated into processes for shaping new and ongoing services.   Often decisions are made and gridlocks broken in Committee settings by virtue of persistence and strength of opinion alone. Why not appeal to an external arbiter who happens to be both our constituent and benefactor: the student? Some possible ways to do this:

    o A dedicated budget line to support student engagement.   Students know what's good for them, but they know it even better with tangible bait.

    o A subcommittee of Library Board for student engagement, on which students would be invited to sit. There are precedents for such a move in other campus contexts (including the Library Senate Committee)

    o Further focus groups and other social research methodologies for examining other services (such as subject guides) and better understanding constituencies (such as international students)

- UNB needs an intranet/portal that aggregates research, learning, and communication. Whether Blackboard is the ultimate vehicle for this or not, courseware has to play a pivotal role and its adoption across faculties has to be consistent and complete.   Although it is beyond the scope of this study, there is no denying that CETL and ITS must properly resource, support, and champion Blackboard with considerable backing from both University administration and teaching units.

- If we had a stable federated search utility that staff could confidently recommend, it would be reflected in our implementations and students would use it. At this point SingleSearch is a little like Blackboard in that it is a great idea not properly leveraged. We need to decide whether we

want to go with the hosted SingleSearch solution or some other approach. The current ASIN-hosted utility is performing unacceptably sub-par.

- The upcoming version of Library Blackboard should address the multiple sign-on issue so that students who sign into Blackboard have direct proxied access to library resources without additional logins (where their status permits).

- The summer retreat for instruction librarians might be a good time and place to explore the librarian-student dynamic. How we relate to and understand one another has significant effects on our success – and theirs.