Best Practices for Mobile–Friendly Courses

Blackboard mobile

Getting Started with Mobile Learning

Mobile learning may sound complex, but in principle it is simple: mobile learning lets students benefit from interacting with their course content on the devices that they use to connect with every other aspect of their lives, nearly 24/7. Offering your course material in such an easily accessible mode can improve your students' engagement and participation, and ultimately make a positive impact on learning outcomes and retention.

Mobile Learning can take place in two ways:

1. **Inside the classroom and during class time**
   This often works best when there is a 1-to-1 initiative, where students have a device each (such as a tablet)

2. **Outside the classroom—students learn in their own time**
   This can support the 'flipped classroom' model

Mobile technology is not meant to address every single piece of your Blackboard course. It should be used smartly to handle key features – in other words, those which translate best to a mobile device. To start, try adding one mobile activity to each of your courses. Even if you do nothing different in building courses in Blackboard Learn, students can log into Blackboard Mobile Learn and access their courses and organization, post to discussions and blogs, and check grades, while on the go.

Supported Devices

- **iPhone**
- **iPod Touch**
- **iPad**
- **Android**
- **BlackBerry***
- **webOS***

*BlackBerry and webOS are only supported at institutions with an institutional license

Design to Complement Not Replace

Not everything an instructor builds will be mobile-friendly, nor should it be. Mobile learning is meant to support multiple modalities of learning through multiple channels. We wouldn't generally encourage an instructor to design a course expecting it to be experienced exclusively on a mobile device. However, there are certain use cases where Blackboard Mobile Learn does add unique value, such as:

- Ability to upload photos and videos anytime, anywhere to discussions, blogs, journals
- Ability to respond to or post a comment to a discussion, blog or journal
- Ability to extend learning experience/studying/practice into places and times you wouldn't normally have the opportunity (bus, metro, cafe queue)
- Ability to access announcements and grades on the go
- Enhancing experiential activity through expanded opportunities to interact with peers simply, through mobile devices, while out and about (finding architecture examples in a city for a discussion board)

Setting Up a Course

1. Do you want to create folders or content areas or learning modules – you have to decide how you want to structure your course.
2. Are you going to do it by week, unit or chapter?
3. How do you want students to interact with each other?
4. How are you going to interact with students?
5. Start building content and assignments and assessments around that content

Best Practices: Designing Content

When designing content for consumption on mobile devices, it is important to consider the following:

- Screen real estate: mobile devices have much smaller displays than desktop computers, and size varies from one device to another.
- Connection speeds: mobile data network speeds are considerably slower. As a result, content will potentially take longer to download, unless the mobile device is using a WiFi connection.
- There is a wide range of mobile devices on the market, and files are handled differently among various manufacturers and mobile software platforms.
- Mobile technology can put up barriers for users who may struggle with touch screen devices, small screens and buttons, and complex menu systems.

Text Documents and Presentations

It is likely that the majority of content in your Blackboard course will either be text documents or presentations. Due to the limited screen size on mobile devices, the subject matter of your documents may require considerable scrolling and/or zooming in order to be visible.

Here are a few tips that you may consider when producing course content:

- Use a larger font size – this will eliminate the amount of zooming required on a mobile device. It's often easier for users to zoom out on a desktop than have to zoom in on a mobile device.

- Use simple formatting – use sans-serif fonts which are easy to read, choose colors sensibly (contrasting, for example), and keep titles short and succinct.

- Keep images to a minimum – Large images will only increase the file size of the document, and can sometimes affect the display of a document on a mobile device. If you need to supply images, attach them to your course as a separate file (see further information below).

It is also important to choose your file formats carefully. Most mobile devices will support a wide-range of file formats, but to maximize the range of compatible devices, we recommend using the following formats:

.DOC or .DOCX	.PDF	.PPT	.JPG, .GIF, .PNG (for images)

Media

Incorporating audio and video media can greatly improve your Blackboard course and make it more engaging for students. The Blackboard Mobile Learn app has been designed to support the delivery of rich media content on mobile devices.

However, when attaching audio and video items to your course, you must bear in mind that not all mobile devices can play all types of media files. Additionally, the quality and length of an audio or video file will greatly affect the download time required—an important point to consider if your students are accessing Blackboard Mobile Learn with their mobile network data connection, which is typically slower than a wireless connection.

Here are some recommendations for audio and video content:

♫ Audio

- Use MP3 file format
- Use audio quality of no more than 128kbps.
- Keep the length short— (5 minutes maximum)

▣ Video

- Use MP4 file format
- Keep your video dimensions small
- 480x320 is recommended for the iPhone—this should play back nicely on most modern mobile devices
- 640x480 is recommended for the iPad
- If possible, use a software which has 'presets' for producing videos specifically for devices such as the iPhone/iPod touch and the iPad.

Content Item	Use Case	Best Practice in Learn	Mobile Friendly Practice
Rich graphics	Complement course content with relevant graphics to make it visually engaging and appealing.	Use the Content Editor Create an Item from the "Build Content" dropdown in the course content area and attach graphics from there. **OR** Using the Mashups dropdown within the Content Editor, you can embed a Flickr stream.	Create a File under "Build Content," which will allow students to view the files properly on their devices.

YouTube Video		Use the Content Editor to upload a YouTube video from the "Build Content" dropdown under the Mashup subheading	Create a weblink under "Build Content" and paste the YouTube video URL. The student will be automatically directed to view the video via their mobile device's web browser. You can add in an instruction "From a mobile device, be sure to select view in browser"
Rich media	Complement course content with rich media to make it more engaging and personal for different types of learners	Use the Content Editor Create an Item from the "Build Content" dropdown in the course content area and attach media from there. Media types include flash, youtube, mp3, mp4, quicktime, etc.). **OR** Using the Mashups dropdown within the Content Editor, you can embed a YouTube or a SlideShare presentation.	Create a File of MP3 Audio or MP4 video files under "Build Content" (no flash and no Content Editor) [1] **OR** Add a Weblink under "Build Content" with a very clear title such as "Cells Video – view in browser" [2]

📣 ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **This is a key communication tool that can be checked 'on the go' by students, and updated on the go by instructors.**

- **Since students are used to checking their mobile devices for updates via email and text, mobile access to announcements can help you re-think the way you currently use announcements. For example, you may choose to use it for posting a reminder about items to prepare for class.**

- **As an instructor, you no longer have to be at a computer to post an announcement; you can post an announcement using the Blackboard Mobile Learn app on your mobile device.**

Activity	Use Case	Best Practice in Learn	Mobile Friendly Practice
Update and view announcements Update and view announcements	Instructors can use Announcements to communicate with students	Instructors can post announcements from the course menu within Blackboard Learn. Announcements that automatically populate (eg. test posted) are immediately viewable on students' computers and mobile devices.	**Student Benefit:** Announcements entered through the Learn UI are supported by Mobile Learn. **Instructor Benefit:** Instructors can post announcements directly from their mobile devices using Blackboard Mobile Learn. Keep the announcement concise for optimal viewing on a mobile device.

[1] Due to manufacturer restrictions, not all media files are accessible on all types of mobile devices. For example, Flash cannot be viewed on iOS devices.
[2] Sometimes the "View in Browser" option is a viable alternative on mobile devices.

▤ MENUS AND TITLES

- **It's critical to ensure that menu items and content titles can be easily viewed on mobile devices**

Activity	Use Case	Best Practice in Learn	Mobile Friendly Practice
Build a course menu that is easy to navigate in both Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Mobile Learn		Use clear titles for menu items	Ensure titles don't wrap. Dividers don't appear.
Create titles for folders, content, assignments and assessments within a course	Build content, assignments and assessments that are accessible and usable within the Blackboard Learn UI as well as on a mobile device.	Use descriptive titles for interacting with content, assignments and assessments within a course.	Don't use symbols in titles; they won't appear on a mobile device. All folders and items need to be given descriptive titles, as their previous context may not be viewable on all mobile devices. For example: • Instead of "Assignment 1," use "Submit Assignment 1" or "Read Assignment 1" • Instead of "Assessments," use "Take Week 1 Assessment"
List courses in Blackboard Mobile Learn	Create course names that are easy to identify and read in both Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Mobile Learn	Create course names that are short, simple, and legible. Course names can be modified from the Control Panel, under Customization and Properties.	Keep the Course Name as short as possible. The Course ID can contain more detailed information, such as the department and course number.

▤ GENERAL CONTENT

- **It's necessary to take an extra step to ensure files can be easily viewed on a mobile device**

Activity	Use Case	Best Practice in Learn	Mobile Friendly Practice
Instruct students to interact with a file that has been added to your course	Post files for students to access, and include instructions for what the students should do with the file.	Use the Content Editor Create an Item from the "Build Content" dropdown in the course content area and attach files from there. This is a best practice because it provides access to the Content Editor within that item.	*This will seem redundant, but is necessary to ensure students can access content from their mobile devices* Files that are added within the Content Editor are not supported within the Blacboard Mobile Learn app. • To enable students to view instructions created in the Content Editor, instructors should create a PDF of that content area. Upload the PDF separately with the title "Instructions". • If you wish for students to view file natively, create a File under "Build Content"

GRADES

- Students are able to track their progress easily from anywhere at anytime by logging into Blackboard Mobile Learn and viewing their grades. Instructors do not have the ability to view grades for their students at this time.

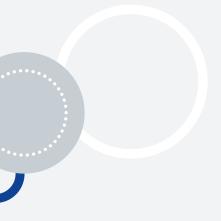| Activity	Use Case	Best Practice in Learn	Mobile Friendly Practice
Allow students to check their grades on-the-go	Give students access to their progress at any given time	Instructors grade using the Grade Center or the Needs Grading view on their laptop/desktop	Grades entered through the Learn UI are supported by Mobile Learn and available for students to view. At this time, instructors cannot grade using the Blackboard Mobile Learn app.

BLOGS, JOURNALS, WIKIS & DISCUSSIONS

- These tools offer a real opportunity to encourage collaborative learning, reflection, and discussions amongst students.
- Students can post entries and comments on their peers' entries directly from their mobile devices.
- By using the media capturing capabilities of their mobile device, students can easily attach photos and videos to blog, discussion, and journal posts.
- Depending on the subject matter, you might want to consider using these tools 'in the field' or other practical use cases outside a lecture environment. For example, culinary students might capture videos of their completed work and upload them to a blog straight from the kitchen, or architecture students might find photos of building designs to support class discussions.

Activity	Use Case	Best Practice in Learn	Mobile Friendly Practice
Encourage blog participation across multiple modalities	Provide students an expanded forum for sharing thoughts with their peers and inviting commentary	Create a Blog assignment under the Tools menu within your course content area.	Instructors and students have the ability to create and contribute to blogs from their mobile device, and can capture and upload photos and videos from their devices directly into blogs. **NOTE:** Make sure you link to the blog you want students to participate in. Since you can't link to a specific blog post in Mobile Learn, you must link to a general one.
Encourage discussion participation across multiple modalities	Synchronous collaboration, debate, or general conversation around a particular topic outside of the traditional learning environment	Create a discussion under the Tools menu within your course content area. Discussions with clearly defined threads encourage participation.	Instructors and students have the ability to create and contribute to discussions from their mobile device, as well as capture and upload photos and videos from their devices directly into discussions.

Encourage journal participation across multiple modalities	Encourage self-reflection around a particular topic outside of the traditional learning environment	Create a Journal assignment under the Tools menu within your course content area.	Students can view and create journal entries from their mobile device. Instructors can view and comment on journal entries from their mobile device.

✅ Tasks

- **Use the Tasks tool in your Blackboard course to help students stay organized.**

- **Set-up a list of tasks for students to complete – they can view and update the status of their tasks on their mobile device.**

- **You could also use this tool inside your classroom if each student has access to a mobile device.**

    Set up a list of tasks for students to complete in a lesson and ask each one to update the status of their task as it is completed.

    As an instructor, you can login to Blackboard on a desktop computer and monitor the progress of each student. You can then offer personalized assistance as needed.

📘 Mobile-compatible Tests

- **Choose to build mobile compatible tests under the Assessments menu (Learn 9.1 only)**

- **Tests that contain ONLY the following question types can automatically be taken via mobile devices:**

    True/False

    Multiple Choice

    Short Answer

    Hot Spot

    Fill-In-Multiple-Blanks

    File Response (images only)

    Calculated Numeric

- **Any test that contains question types other than those listed above cannot be taken via a mobile device. Any student attempting to access the test via the Blackboard Mobile Learn app will be automatically instructed to take the test in the Learn environment on their computer.**

- **All mobile compatible tests can be taken either on a computer OR a mobile device**

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