

Navigation should be intuitive: Designing a Blackboard site using website principles

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The Blackboard site

Health Ergonomics in the Workplace is a module on the online distance learning (DL) PG cert Vocational Rehabilitation. Feedback from previous modules suggested that Blackboard could be awkward or difficult to navigate and this has also been shown in the literature (Carnevale 2003). Published research around DL focuses on the learning experience (e.g. Boling et al. 2013, Heirdsfield et al. 2011, Kearns & Frey 2010) however there is no research looking at the actual navigation of sites. Before engaging in the learning materials students need to be able to locate them. Hallas (2008) highlights that making the technology more student friendly can facilitate effective learning and so the Blackboard site was designed in a way that was much more intuitive and avoided numerous folders and attachments.

What was the rationale?

Students came from a range of backgrounds. Some had completed modules previously and others were brand new to the course. It was important that they all started on a level playing field in terms of being able to access the materials.

The site was therefore designed on simple website user-centred principles (Idler 2013):

- accessibility
- clarity & simplicity
- good information architecture
- familiarity
- learnability
- credibility
- relevance

What the students said...
"I felt that my hand was held as I walked through the site"
"It was very easy to navigate"
"It was easy to see what I needed to do"
"...much easier than searching through all those folders"

The external examiner commented...
"a very impressive Blackboard site to support the student learning"



What were the outcomes?

The main focus on distance learning should be on the pedagogy and the theoretical content. How this is presented to the students however is an area that has not been explored. The design of the Blackboard site used ergonomic principles in terms of intuitive design for best fit between users and the technology. Positive feedback was received from students and the external examiner and it has been identified as an example of good design by other staff members in the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing who have adopted a similar layout of their sites. Further development is planned but it is aimed that other modules on the PGcert Vocational Rehabilitation will be redesigned using the same principles

References

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