



Digital Excellence Impact Case Studies

2022/2023

SLAR Digital Excellence: Blackboard Ultra Award 2022
*Facilitating easy student navigation and
engagement of content within Blackboard Ultra
module sites*





Within folders, materials are organised to be as accessible as possible

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Dr Lee Copping is the winner of the first SLAR Digital Excellence: Blackboard Ultra award 2022. Dr Lee won this award because of its great use of announcements, keeping learners informed and updated on the progress of the module. In addition, the organisation of the module is exceptional, weekly content is organised into individual learning modules with supporting descriptions, which we felt was a great way to organise the teaching content and aid student navigation. Another excellent feature of the module is the regular use of formative quizzes used on a weekly basis to allow students to test themselves and increase their confidence.

Through the setup and organisation of the module there is clear evidence of planning and structuring learning that uses concepts highlighted in the toolkit.

Background

September 2021 saw the roll out of the new Blackboard Ultra (BBU) portal to replace the existing Blackboard facilities across Teesside University. This platform has been designed with usability at heart with a focus on accessibility over a wider range of mobile devices. The new platform thus changes the way we disseminate course materials and invites new ways of ensuring that students find the content they need as painlessly as possible. This change also coincided with Teesside University becoming the first UK Adobe Creative Campus, giving staff and students easy access to a host of content creation tools that could be used to enhance content presentation.

In this case study, I will talk about one of my module sites only (PSY2065-N: Conducting Research in Psychology) won the 2021/22 Digital Excellence Blackboard Ultra Module Award.

Approach

When you land on BBU module page, the default starting position is the top. It's common for students to not spend too long looking for more 'administrative documents' such as course handbooks, contact details, schedules etc, whereas they will spend more time searching for actual learning material. Therefore, making this material always visible makes it easier for them to find when they need it (they always see it first). Figure 1 illustrates the top of the module page.

Here all the key documentation is available. The module handbook is an Adobe Creative Express video which is quicker and easier to digest than a traditional document. That which cannot be dealt with in the video is presented in the links below it (student regulations, library resources, module discussion board etc). Students must scroll past these to get to module content below it, so it makes it harder for them to fail to find the correct information.

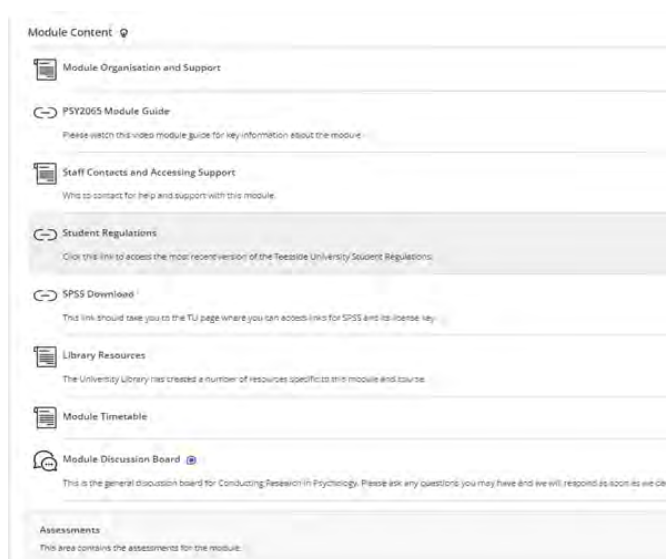


Figure 1: Module Landing Structure.

BBU has several key differences to its predecessor in that its hierarchical filing system allows for only three levels (Learning Modules, Folder, Content). This is so that users accessing via mobile and touchscreen devices do not get lost between navigating multiple embedded layers. This at first may seem like a challenge (many of us are historically guilty of creating folders, within folders, within folder...) but there are ways of optimising content organisation to allow easy and scaffolded navigation through a site. BBU by default presents this material as a list that can be scrolled up and down. Content therefore should be easily visible and labelled so that it is obvious as to what it contains.

In this module, each Learning Module holds content for a single week and is clearly labelled as such. It also contains the title of the content and a brief description. This allows students to see a top level of the course immediately (and mirrors module structure details already provided via handbooks etc).

Within each learning module, there are a series of folders. You can have as many folders as you like but remember that BBU presents this view as a list, so any student having to navigate within this module has to keep scrolling until they find what they are looking for. In this module, folders denote a particular session. In Week 1, we have a lecture, a seminar, and a dissertation workshop, so, as in Figure 2, these each get a dedicated space. This cues students to look for content by both week and session.

Within each weekly Learning Module, I created a very short Adobe Creative Express video which summarises what was covered in that week. The idea behind this was so students didn't have to keep opening each module, folder, and file to find material if they couldn't quite remember when and where they had covered it – the video should quickly signpost.

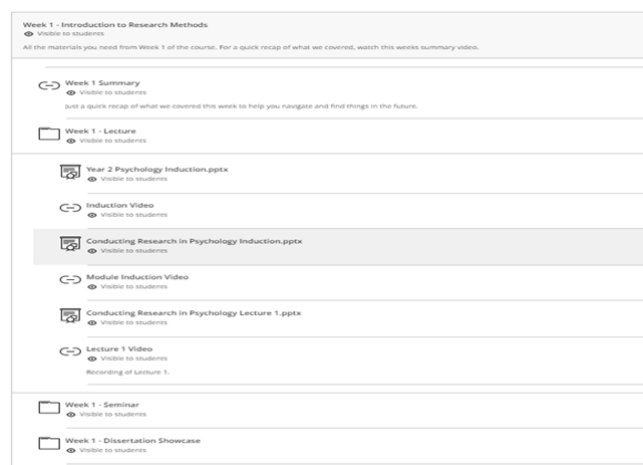


Figure 2: Module Filing Structure (Module, Folder and Content View)

Within folders, materials are organised to be as accessible as possible (in this week, there were three lecture segments so these each have a powerpoint and a recorded video). Remember that these will be presented listwise, so the trick is to try and keep as little in each folder as possible to minimise student scrolling.

Outcomes

These two basic steps in module site design help keep content manageable and structured in such a way as to facilitate easy navigation. Combined with other features such as weekly formatives to track engagement and weekly feedback surveys to gauge student opinion, module sites can be optimised to serve a number of engagement and monitoring functions while still being functionally accessible for content access.

Over 100 students have benefitted from this module design, and Lee has shared this best practice with colleagues in his department who wished to be added to the module for inspiration. He is aiming to implement some of this module design as a standard across the department in the next year.