Reviews

Resource Review: Blackboard Collaborate Ultra: An Online, Interactive Teaching Tool

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The last decade has seen a significant increase in the use of online, interactive teaching (Wdonik, 2014) in higher education. This correlates to the increased use of student-centred learning approaches used in higher education (Baeten, Dochy, Struyven, Parmentier, & Vanderbruggen, 2016) including in traditional lectures (Plush & Kehrwald, 2014). The utilisation of online teaching tools has had a significant impact on teaching (Hussein, 2016). These tools are an excellent way of promoting student satisfaction (Li & Pitts, 2009) and, in particular, Millennials' or digital natives' desire for interactivity (McCann, Schneiderman, & Hinton, 2010; Prensky, 2001). Management and business educators have also found that online interactive teaching tools have enhanced higher level thinking (Wdowik, 2014), communication and problem-solving competencies (Politis & Politis, 2016).

Based on the range of online interactive teaching tools available to educators and their institutions, I strongly endorse Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. Blackboard Collaborate Ultra and the original Blackboard Collaborate are options available to institutions on the learner management system, Blackboard Learn. Blackboard Collaborate Ultra is a web conferencing or synchronous collaborative online teaching tool, which is browser-based and therefore does not require any installation. Instead, when setting up a session, a link is generated which can then be provided to participants to access. As Adams Becker et al. (2017) advocate to provide additional flexibility and convenience for students, sessions can also be recorded and

viewed at a later date. Participants can also be assigned other roles based on different levels of permission, such as presenter, moderator or, to support those who are hard of hearing, captioner. From both educators' and students' perspectives Blackboard Collaborate Ultra has a user-friendly interface and can be applied to different types of online teaching methods including lectures, seminars, tutorials and drop-in sessions. It has a number of interactive features, the most popular of which are polling and chat.

In this review I will share my experiences of using many of the features of Blackboard Collaborate Ultra for online lectures, seminars, tutorials and drop-in. These experiences are based on my Study to Work undergraduate module, which supports students from a variety of different management and business programmes, in the internship application and selection process. The examples that are referred to offer ideas for the array of ways in which Blackboard Collaborate Ultra could be employed on other management modules, from undergraduate to doctoral level of study.

In preparation for the start of the session I set a profile photo of myself to personalise the learning experience, followed by the "Share files" feature, which allows me to display my PowerPoint slides on the screen. To engage students from the outset, I switch the video on, so that students see my face when I welcome them to the session. However, to allow students to focus on the slides, I turn the video off for the remainder of the session.

Throughout the session I use "Content Editing Tools" to select tools such as "Pointer", "Pencil", "Shapes" and "Text" to annotate slides, varying the tool that I use on some slides to keep students enthused. The exception to this is when I use a PDF as the main visual resource because using all of these tools helps to emphasise to students the attention to detail

that needs to be paid when, for instance, writing a resumé. To emulate a face to face session, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra has a "Hand raise" feature for individual students to ask questions, which the educator can respond to at that time, or reply to towards the end of the session.

The "Collaborate Panel Tools" comprises of the main interactive features offered by Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. I especially like to use the "Polling" tool, which has up to five multiple choice answer options, to ask students questions such as 'What the main competency that employers say interns do not possess?'. To build excitement, I use this tool in conjunction with the countdown "Timer". During the "Polling" I can also see how many students have answered the question and then press others to commit to an answer.

To advance critical thinking, I pose an open-ended question such as 'Give one tip on how you could prepare for a careers fair', then ask students to answer using the "Chat" tool. I facilitate answers to the "Chat" using a combination of audio and text reply feedback, which as Sims (2003) asserts promotes meaningful interactions between the educator and students. To provide students with instant gratification I intersperse my text reply feedback with "Chat emojis". From an educator's perspective I like how the "Chat" encourages students to respond who may not be as confident in vocalising their answers in face to face sessions.

The "Breakout groups" tool is really useful, particularly during seminars, to assign students into groups and then drop in on each group to examine what they are discussing during, for instance, a mock assessment centre exercise. It also has the additional benefit for the educator of being able to recall students instantaneously back to the main session, which is harder to manage with overenthusiastic groups in large cohorts during face to face sessions.

I use the "Share Whiteboard" tool with students to generate a mind map of networks of support for job applications. To add a more fun element I stipulate that they must only draw their answer, which because they do not have to worry about their grammar, also encourages second language English speakers to contribute. This tool is also advantageous to use during drop-in tutorials, as students find it helpful if I make visual notes of our discussions.

Blackboard Collaborate Ultra has numerous benefits in terms of student-centred teaching methods. But there are a few minor concerns, some of which can be worked around. Firstly, PowerPoint slides may appear slightly differently when they have been uploaded and shared in relation to highlighted words, tables and graphics, et cetera. "Polling" needs some development as it only has numbers for the answers, thus requiring a PowerPoint slide to be written, with the question and the numbers with corresponding answers. To add a competitive element, it would be advantageous if there was an option for students to see the same overview as educators, of "Polling" responses as it updates live as the educator. The timer feature could be increased in size so that it is more easily visible. As many management and business schools attract large module cohorts, then for online lectures of more than 250, a large session request must be submitted to Blackboard well in advance. Due to having a large cohort of 360 students attending my online lectures, I muted participants' cameras and microphones. I also enlisted another colleague to help facilitate the "Chat" and, to ensure that the "Chat" was not over demanding to facilitate, requested that students only give one response.

To summarise I would highly recommend Blackboard Collaborate Ultra for delivering a range of online teaching activities. As a result of it offering a great deal of flexibility to the

learning environment and being user-friendly, I aim to continue to build in more Blackboard

Collaborate Ultra sessions and reduce the number of face to face sessions on my module. For

someone who always favoured interactive teaching in sessions of different cohort sizes, I

wholeheartedly recommended Blackboard Collaborate Ultra.

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