

USING BLACKBOARD™ TO AUGMENT STUDENT LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES: EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNT FROM A LEADERSHIP CLASS

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Introduction

Large classes pose major challenges to lecturers and students alike. On the one hand, because of limited time resources, lecturers may find it rather difficult, if not impossible, to address students' individual learning needs. On the other hand, because the attention span of students decreases as a function of class size, and because their individual learning needs can only be addressed with difficulty, a large lecture leaves many questions unanswered. One means that we found particularly useful to overcome these problems is the use of Blackboard™.

Process

In this summary we would like to share our experiences and the lessons we learnt from using Blackboard™ in BH3319: Theory and Practice of Leadership, taught during 24 consecutive weeks in the academic year 2005/2006. The size of this class was 120 students, who were assigned to 22 learning groups. The set up of Blackboard™ for this class allowed students asynchronous access to class material, to post questions and inquiries in a discussion forum, to which all students and lecturers could reply to, and to interact with members of their learning groups in separate forums enabling them to share and post files, discuss, and communicate with all group members. We had access to each of these areas and could feed back our comments and thoughts to students.

To begin with, one of the more useful aspects of Blackboard™ is the drop letterbox mechanism, allowing us and the students to communicate with each other through posting of messages/information. We partitioned the module into several areas to control the flow of information, manage expectations and engage the students in dialogue.

Prior to the start of the module, we established a course information area where we provided students with information about the module allowing them to gain a better understanding of how the module would be run (thus managing expectations). We also engaged them in early dialogue in the discussion area by posting the general expectations we had, and allowing them to respond and share their own expectations. We used the announcements and calendar section to co-ordinate the students' readings, to synchronise external projects, and to ensure that they had the latest up to date information.

The only cautionary note to make here is to manage students' expectations about timing of responses. At times, students will post questions or make comments very late at night and expect answers by the next morning. We suspect this is a by-product of 'texting' communication style and participation in non-academic discussion boards. We told the students that we would read and answer comments and queries at a specific frequency, so they could expect when they might receive a response. A reasonable time for non-emergency responses is that we would check the boards on Mon, Wed and Fri – so there was rarely more than 48 hours without a response.

Discussion Boards

Perhaps the most significant element of Blackboard™ was the discussion board area. Within the discussion board area we had several opportunities for students to interact with each other as well as to post questions, concerns and comments. What we found was that by having students post questions and concerns anonymously, if desired, we received more candid questions than in the open classroom. In addition, this medium allowed more questions to be asked, and we could ensure that everyone had access to the answers and thus could then proctor the information more appropriately. We also found by the end of the module that the students were answering each other's questions and had assumed ownership for sharing information. This is fairly amazing given the class size.

When using discussion boards, a couple of points should be noted. The first is that for students to participate there has to be something of interest for them to draw their attention to. By posing a provocative question, by making a response part of an assignment or by stimulating an open debate on controversial concepts, students were more likely to take the time off-line to engage with each other through the discussion board section.

One of the forums was titled "the helpdesk", and this was a general help area that allowed students to pose questions. Examples of these questions were everything from not understanding a particular theory to asking for clarification on submission guidance for presentations. By the end of the module there were over 140 questions and responses posed in the helpdesk section. As noted earlier, this is fairly significant in that it allowed the tutors, to engage with the students off-line and once again to share this information.

One aspect that we were not able to engage with, but plan on in future sessions, is to bring in a guest 'moderator' for a discussion board. This capability allows us to give the students contact with a person of note (perhaps a top researcher in the field, perhaps a CEO, etc...) while minimizing the overhead required for bringing such a person in physically.

Group Work

Perhaps the second most significant area for utilisation in Blackboard™ is the group area. Blackboard™ allows tutors or facilitators to partition class members into smaller groups and each of these groups can then possess their own area. This area has a group discussion board which only the members of that group and the instructors will be privy to, collaboration sessions which allows them to have on-line chat sessions, whiteboard, and a variety of other mechanisms. It also allows the ability to exchange files, and if they do not have group e-mails, then Blackboard™ provides e-mail addresses to them.

We used 22 groups within the Leadership module ranging in size from 5-7 members. We attempted to keep the group sizes consistent with each other and the variation was typically due to having exchange students join the group either for the first 10 sessions or for the second 10 sessions. Out of the 22 groups within the module, seven used the Blackboard™ facilities extensively, several used them for dropping a comment or two and the remainder did not use at all. One of the benefits speaking with the groups that used it, was that it allowed them to engage asynchronously with each other. They did not have to co-ordinate a meeting time, all they had to do was to suggest that during the course of the week everyone log on to this board, read the comments and respond to them. Therefore, it made it much easier for the students with their busy schedules to co-ordinate information, exchange, and to in fact work on collaboration of joint projects.

The students that did not use Blackboard™ invariably complained of one or more students not being able to attend meetings and the difficulty of arranging a meeting time for all members. Thus, using Blackboard™ to support the group work of students becomes an extremely efficient way of collaboration and exchange of ideas.

Of those groups that utilised Blackboard™, the predominance of utilisation was within the group discussion board area. Here group members introduced themselves to each other and would pose ideas, establish group norms and procedures for how they would work together, discuss the group work requirement of the course, and/or share information that they gained external to sitting in the classroom.

Perhaps the most difficult task for the tutors at this point is to moderate the interaction within each of the group areas. Blackboard™ does not have an easily identifiable flagging system that allows tutors to note when new messages have been posted within group sections themselves. To find out that new messages have been posted, tutors have to go through five or six clicks to visually look at the group discussion board to see if there are new messages. One recommendation for the Blackboard™ team would be for them to identify a mechanism that allows when new messages are posted within the group boards that they are flagged to the tutors' attention, that there are in fact interchanges going on. The reason that this is critical is that both Yves and I were able to facilitate, and moderate the intra-group interactions, so as students wrestled with concepts and worked on their projects we could in fact intercede when they were using concepts and theoretical constructs inappropriately. We also could make suggestions that would allow them to come more quickly to understanding as they built their projects and worked together.

Although not completely conducive to tutors' monitoring, this is another strong area for the medium. In that the normal classroom situation with student numbers of this size, module leaders and tutors are typically unable to facilitate group processes. With the posting of communications on Blackboard™ it enables the module tutor to in fact monitor/observe and then to intercede if necessary, ensuring the group is meeting their objectives.

Assignments

The submission of assignments is also facilitated by using electronic media system such as Blackboard™. Students are able to submit electronically any document that they would have normally printed out and submitted in hard copy. By way of example, students were required to produce a Leadership Philosophy paper. They could save it as a Microsoft Word product and submit it electronically. The system automatically captures the date/time of submission, the electronic attachment is available to the instructor/marker immediately and the marker can in fact jot down comments on the document itself electronically and return the feedback to the students.

This is a slightly more cumbersome process for tutors than the former submission because it allows greater marker/student interaction. In the past when you conducted pen and ink marking, you wrote two to three sentences down on the sheet on top of the product, you gave it back, or perhaps one or two comments inside a written product. By having the electronic version available, what we found were that the markers spent significantly more time marking the assignments, resulting in the students receiving more feedback that is personal. This also caused our assessment strategy to take on a more developmental approach as well. So while it does take more time to do this we would argue that this is time well spent because it thus becomes developmental as opposed to pure assessment.

Some problems occurred during electronic submission of material, the first of which is that the students are not used to doing this. Therefore, there were some mistakes made during submission. For instance, one student attempted to save a draft of her submission, yet accidentally submitted it as completed. Once this occurred, the student could no longer access their material unless the instructor released it back to them.

Secondly, as they were unfamiliar with this function, some students were unaware of the location and had concerns that they had submitted the wrong documentation. Both of these issues could be addressed by having the students do a non-graded submission early in the course to rehearse the steps and procedures that they would go through for the actual submission of graded work.

One of the severe limitations of this approach is that students cannot submit their information anonymously. It is affiliated with their student name underneath Blackboard™, and thus the requirement for anonymity is not met. Within the Leadership module this is not as critical an issue in that most of the assignments require personal reflection and/or introspection which allows the markers to identify the students anyway.

We also found with using the electronic submission that not only did the markers tend to give more feedback on the actual assignment itself, but they would also provide more feedback in the electronic box available to them to give immediate feedback to students. The efficiencies of collecting all of the information electronically, of having a standing log of submissions and submission times makes a substantial savings of time for the Undergraduate Office, particularly as they process hundreds of course works from students in different areas. The drawback stated earlier is that student submissions are not anonymous.

In the end, we believe that the strengths of the electronic submission process and the efficiencies gained by it outweigh the small risk of biased marking due to non-anonymity of students.

As noted previously, Blackboard™ allows facilitators to post comments to students in the aggregate. We found it to be a very useful way at the end of each lecture to come back and redress questions and points that were brought up during that particular lecture. For example, when students were concerned and interested in what was expected of them for the case study, Yves and I were able to come back and in the message bulletin board, reiterate what we stated in class. This becomes a reinforcing communication strategy to ensure that shared understanding is achieved, and that expectations are being managed appropriately.

This is also an area to allow for external areas of interest to be offered to students. For instance, there are some students that were very interested in certain themes within the module, beyond just the coursework itself and had asked for additional readings or areas that they could satisfy their curiosity. Blackboard™ not only allows this it allows students that want to do more to have access to websites, to readings, to discussions, that allow them to go further than a typical three hour lecture would.

Conclusion

We found that Blackboard™ is a very useful augmentation tool for face-to-face classrooms. Students, particularly younger students are more prepared to engage electronically. They, through their upbringing, understand chat-rooms, discussion boards and message forums far better perhaps than instructors do and are prepared to use these to their benefit. They appreciate the opportunity to engage with other students and instructors off-line, outside of the two/three hour window that they typically attend class in. This is because it provided them with a much more intimate experience within the classroom (e.g. even though they are 1 of a 120 students they do in fact get individual attention through the electronic augmentation, or at least this is what they perceived).

It seems that their individual learning needs could be much better addressed than would have been possible in the lecture itself. Moreover, while office hours are designed to address these needs, they are not very efficient as only a few students can be addressed at a time.

Student comments at end of the module suggested that we should continue to use Blackboard™ in the fashion of the module and should perhaps expand on its offerings. Some of the potentials for expansion could include the development and implementation of the BLOG, for instance in the form of a students' online journal where they record and present their observations of leadership from their day-to-day lives. The BLOG has become a very popular internet phenomenon that allows people to share their thoughts and to reflect upon their experiences in a matter that is open to facilitation and

inspection. So perhaps in the future, the idea of running a BLOG might be another useful feature that can be incorporated into a Blackboard™ learning environment.

Secondly, while some student groups used their group forums quite frequently, others did not. Because of the benefits these group forums might have (the most successful student groups used the tool much more often than the less successful groups), it might be worth encouraging students to use this feature. Suboptimal group functioning frequently arises, because students do not meet regularly, and because they hesitate to contact their lecturers when they encounter problems in their groups. We found that the use of group forums allowed students to discuss and meet each other more frequently. It also allowed us to proactively coach and facilitate group interactions consuming only little of our time. Regularly checking what goes on in these groups, and feeding back these observations in a couple of written lines is often sufficient to maintain or improve group functioning. This is not possible in a lecture, and it would be far beyond what can be offered to the groups during office hours.

Thirdly, the use of the helpdesk tool turned out to be very useful. It was highly appreciated by the students because of the timeframe in which their questions could be answered, along with the availability to all other students. Other students replying to our comments allowed us to elaborate much more on some of the questions, which in turn again could be made available to all students deepening their understanding of the answers at hand. The usability of this tool might be further improved and harnessed in the subsequent academic year by expanding the helpdesk, e.g. by breaking it down into categories of questions that people have asked and by capturing these for future students and to build them into a series of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Editor's additional note:

Finally, the external examiner also benefited from this use of technology. We gave her access to the Blackboard™ site, and she was able to see, not only the student assignment, but also the interactive feedback, added like post-it-notes. Naturally, she was impressed.

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Work & Organisational Psychology Group.
Example used with final year undergraduate students
BHM3319: Theory and Practice of Leadership.