

Blackboard Communication Tools

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Introduction

Blackboard Collaborate is the most powerful of the tools available in Blackboard. It is very similar to programs such as Skype, GotoMeeting and WebEx, in that it possesses the ability for live voice and video, live chat, instant messaging, recording, and an interactive whiteboard component. The tool can be either synchronous, through most of its features, or asynchronous utilizing the recording tool. The ability to record a class meeting would be most beneficial for students in different time zones or those needing to review the material discussed in class.

Blackboard has recently purchased Wimba Pronto in order to add the software to its LMS offering. Wimba has powerful voice and chat features that allow instructors and students to communicate in real time at a much faster rate than traditional e-mail. The client can be installed on Windows and Mac, but there are not mobile apps available at this time. Blackboard is working to integrate Blackboard IM into their Mobile Learn app for smartphones, but those features do not work at the current time.

Specific learning activities were designed to be applied to the above mentioned Blackboard tools. The features of Blackboard IM are not as extensive as those available in BB Collaborate but there is still a plethora of possibilities available for instructional purposes. While Collaborate seems to function more as a full classroom setting with a moderator in place to establish order with many students, BB IM is better fit to accomplish small group tasks and communications. BB IM also includes features like chat, video, audio, and whiteboard collaboration which requires pre-instruction to utilize correctly. Students should receive training prior to utilizing BB IM via a text tutorial or a guided practice with an experienced user who can provide instructions and demonstrations of the program. Once students have practiced and feel comfortable navigating through the program, they will be able to complete activities through it.

The following is an example of how BB IM could be utilized to execute a lesson for English as a Second Language students learning about travel. However, the concept could be applied to various content areas for a section of the class in which the teacher wants to assign a group assignment on any topic.

Lesson #1: Create a Presentation about a Travel Destination

Objectives: The students will work collaboratively to develop a PowerPoint presentation about a travel destination.

The students will incorporate vocabulary from Unit 7: Traveling the World and demonstrate comprehension of meaning.

The students will demonstrate knowledge of the functions of BB IM.

Materials: BB IM, class textbook

Pre-Activity (10 minutes): Introduction to Travel Project

The teacher will use the *Office Hours* component to invite the students to attend a brief introduction. The teacher will ensure that all students are present, and use the *video* and *audio* components to take attendance and address the class. The teacher will ask each student to type in the *Chat* their ideal travel destination. The teacher will inform the students that they will complete a group presentation about a travel destination.

Activity # 1 (15 minutes): Teacher Presentation/Example

The teacher will start a *Collaboration*. In this window, the teacher will use the *Screen Sharing* feature to present a PowerPoint about traveling to Mexico. The teacher will present slides entitled “geographic location,” “population,” “historical sites,” “modern attractions,” “traditional foods,” “traditional games,” “traditional music,” and “cultural awareness.” The teacher will inform the students that they will work in groups to complete a similar presentation

about a travel destination. The teacher will use the *Load Content* feature to provide all students with the rubric for the project. The teacher will divide the class into groups, and instruct them to meet immediately to begin planning.

Activity # 2 (20 minutes): Group Work

The students will utilize the *Group Chat* features to select a travel destination they all agree on. The students will then work together to designate work to each person in the group. The students will open the *Collaborate* feature and work on the whiteboard to create an outline of their project. The students will save the whiteboard with their final outline.

Closing Activity (5 minutes): Closing/Submission of Work

The students will report back to the teacher's *Office Hours* space through invitation. The teacher will open the *Collaborate* whiteboard, and ask that each group post their outline, one at a time. The teacher will provide the timeline for the project to be worked on and submitted.

The wide range of tools available through Blackboard Collaborate essentially allow for distance learning students, in a virtual classroom, to experience aspects which replicate an actual classroom. Through accessing Collaborate's tools to their fullest capacity, it is plausible for both students and instructors to create and work in an e-learning community which promotes social activity, structure, and sentiment. This platform also allows for the instruction to be learner centered, which promotes student engagement and participation. Once an instructor ensures that all students have an understanding of how to utilize the features of Collaborate, this program can provide opportunities for many types of interactions in all subject areas.

By providing students with training through a text tutorial like those included in this project, or a video entailing demonstrations of how each component works, the students can independently learn how they can participate in the instructor's planned virtual lessons. If supplemental training is necessary, the instructor can provide a guided tutorial by inviting all

students into BB Collaborate simultaneously, and experiencing firsthand the functions and tools of the program. The instructor would have the role of the moderator just as they would in an actual classroom and could communicate through the video and talk features so that all students could hear and see him/her. With control of the virtual classroom and whiteboard, the teacher can demonstrate step-by-step how to access and utilize each of the available tools. After clarifying any confusion, the teacher and students can proceed to engage in content-related virtual activities.

The following are examples of activities which could be conducted for any content area. This specific lesson was planned for a Technical English for the Petroleum Industry course, taken by Emirati English as a Second Language students. In this course the focus is not only English as a Second Language, but also the acquisition of terminology and information necessary to work in this field.

Lesson # 1: Review of Unit 1

Objectives: The students will categorize the important vocabulary of the unit.

The students will work collaboratively to complete the unit review.

The students will demonstrate acquisition of unit content through formative assessment.

Materials: BB Collaborate, class textbook

Pre-Activity (10 minutes):

The teacher will connect to the *video* and *talk* features, and take attendance at the designated meeting time. The students will respond by pressing the *talk* button, speaking, and then releasing it. The students may also demonstrate presence by writing in the *chat* box. The teacher will make any announcements, and introduce the topic of the lesson. In the previous

lesson the students completed the last section of the unit. In this lesson, the students will review the entire unit.

Activity # 1 (15 minutes): Review Important Vocabulary (Class work)

The teacher will keep all students in the main room, and maintain control of the whiteboard. The teacher will use the video and audio features while writing on the whiteboard. The teacher will display three categories on the whiteboard: jobs, equipment, and oil rigs. The teacher will ask the students to provide the important 28 vocabulary terms from the unit, and which category each vocabulary term belongs in. The students will use the *raise hand* button to be called on. As the students provide answers, the teacher will use the whiteboard to display their input, and complete three categories.

Activity # 2 (20 minutes): Complete the Unit Review from the Textbook (Group work)

The teacher will instruct the students to work together to complete the Unit 1 review. The teacher will use the *Breakout rooms* feature to split the class into groups of 4. The students will utilize *video*, *talk*, and/or *chat* functions to complete the review. The teacher will move from group to group to observe interactions and answer any questions.

Activity # 3 (25 minutes): Unit 1 Review Quiz (Independent work)

The teacher will access the Unit 1 Review Quiz from the *Quiz Library* and send it to each student. The teacher will use the *timer* to display the 25 minutes allotted for the review quiz. The students may use their notes to work independently to complete the Review Quiz.

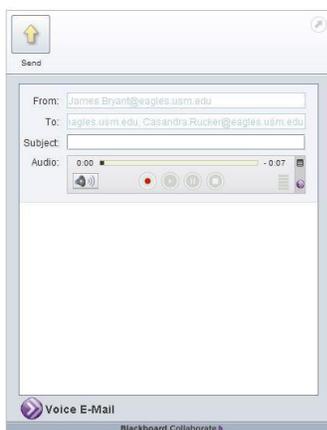
Closing Activity (5 minutes): Checking for Comprehension

The teacher will use the *polling* tool to assess whether the students feel prepared to take the Unit 1 test and continue to Unit 2. The teacher will use both *yes or no* questions and *multiple choice* questions to poll the students:

1. After completing today's lesson, I feel:
 - a. Prepared to take the Unit 1 test.
 - b. Like I need a few more review exercises to be prepared.
 - c. Like I am nowhere near ready!
2. Was today's review beneficial?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. Would you like to continue to Unit 2?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Voice Email

Voice Email (4165 Spr2016 IT 648 H002 Digital
Coms In Ed)

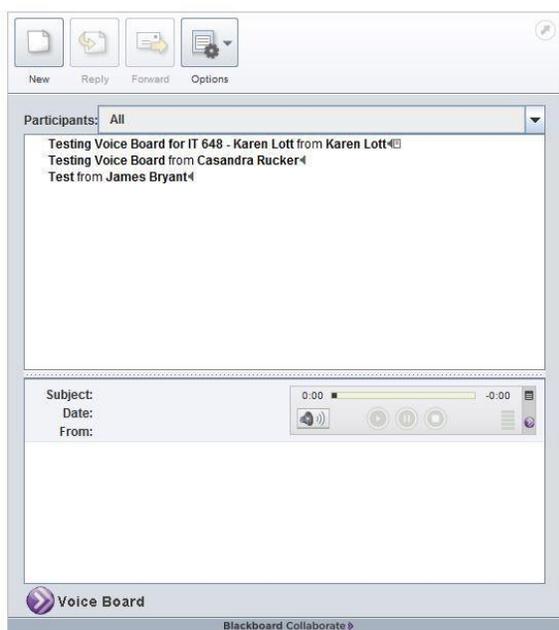


The Blackboard Voice Email feature will allow you to send recorded communications to others in your course. For those who need to communicate quickly, or those who are not gifted typists, there is a benefit. Learning does not stop just because of age or disability, so the impact would be even greater for older learners who may have arthritis. Those who have lost limbs or may have vision issues would also benefit greatly. Although

Blackboard is seldom used in K-12, it would also be beneficial to younger learners who are not yet reading on a level in which the message needs to be delivered. Finally, those who do not speak the English language fluently would benefit from being able to listen to the message. The Voice Email feature can be added to an assignment within Blackboard and students can be

required to submit their assignment using this tool. The instructor can set voice quality limits as well as time limits on the feature. One of the most powerful features is the ability to track the usage of the feature. In this way the instructor would be able to track whether or not the students are using the feature if they are sending items such as their lectures through Voice Email.

Voice Board



The Blackboard Voice Board feature allows the user to record their voice and post a message in text as well. The same benefits are there as they were with Voice Email. Younger students, older students with arthritis, those with disabilities, or those with vision issues and those who do not speak English as their first language would all benefit from this tool. The threaded

approach is similar to a discussion board, and it can be used to either record your voice or post a normal text message. It appears that it is there as a feature for those with accessibility problems since the normal discussion board is the primary focus in the Blackboard layout. The continuous play option would allow you to catch up on all the voice board posts very quickly without having to go in and out of each thread. This feature can also be embedded into an assignment and the instructor has complete control over the audio quality, length, and whether the student has the ability to forward their Voice Board message to another user.

Voice Podcaster

4165 Spr2016 IT 648 H002 Digital Coms In Ed - podcast_name

4165 Spr2016 IT 648 H002 Digital Coms In Ed - podcast_name



The Voice Podcaster feature allows the instructor and student to record their own podcast for the class. This feature would serve as a great medium for teachers to practice podcasting before entering the classroom. Students and instructors can subscribe to the podcasts and access them from most mobile devices. The ability to easily take the learning process with you and listen to learning material while participating in daily activities is powerful for all students.

Very few people are not on the move throughout the day. The podcasts can go with them and allow them to stay current with their learning without it having such an impact on the rest of their activities.

Tool Utility: Current Tools

Blackboard IM

Chat/ Group Chat

Chat simulates conversation by allowing a participant to post a message and a second participant responds immediately through a text based platform in a synchronous environment.

Blackboard IM, when used by educational institutions, has a classmate list that mirrors course enrollment (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012). From this classmate listing, a student can create a

more condensed contact list. This is especially useful for groups that branch off from larger classes. We were able to create a contact list by selecting the members of our group from the preloaded classmate list. For this feature the system requirements are minimal. Once Blackboard IM is downloaded to your computer accessing the application is easy. As long as you have an internet connection communication is as simple as type- post-repeat.

Calling

The Calling feature allows you to switch from text-based to verbal communication. In this feature a participant will invite a member of their contact or classmate list to a call session. This individual must accept the call before it can begin.

Collaborate

The Collaborate window provides a virtual room that allows users to participate in group projects. The collaboration is achieved through three components within the Collaborate window: Screen Share, Whiteboard, and Web Tour. The Screen Share feature gives users the ability to show documents, images or files to other participants. Whiteboard offers drawing, writing, and content loading capabilities to allow participants to share ideas. The Web Tour feature allows the instructor to guide participants through web based Internet tour(Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

Office Hours

Office Hours is a feature of *Blackboard IM* that provides a platform for conducting controlled collaboration sessions. Office Hours allows instructors to hold structured meetings

with students by controlling access to a chat room. The environment is similar a waiting room. While in the main chat room of the Office Hours window the participant can engage in a Chat or Collaborate session with the session owner.

The Office Hours experience differs depending on the role of the participant. The session owner is the person who is conducting office hours and has greater authority in the Office Hours window. The participant sees a different Office Hours screen and must request permission to be admitted to the main chat room. While in the main room they both have the ability to use Chat, Call and/or Collaborate.

The features and set-up of Office Hours is great for distance education. It mimics the one-on-one sessions that students in traditional learning settings have with their instructor. For online instructors dealing with communication fatigue, it allows them to set a specific time for communication with students (Sammons & Ruth, 2007). When students request a meeting within Office Hours, they are required to enter a reason for the appointment. The reason gives the instructor the ability to prioritize student promotion to the main room. Once in the main room Collaborate allows the instructor to assist students with lessons they may be struggling through.

Web Conferencing

Web Conferencing is a dynamic Blackboard communication tool. It possesses the necessary features to create an engaging instructor-lead, synchronous environment without sharing the same physical space (i.e. a classroom). With audio, video, and chat there are numerous applications to get and stay connected with students and instructors. Web

Conferencing also offers innovative tools needed for long distance collaboration like Whiteboard, Application Sharing, and Web tour.

It is important to note that Web Conferencing serves as the nexus between two Blackboard communication tools, Blackboard IM and Blackboard Collaborate. Launching Web Conferencing is only successful if the institution has purchased both Blackboard IM and Blackboard Collaborate (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

Blackboard Collaborate

Blackboard Collaborate is Blackboard's web conferencing offering. Blackboard Collaborate allows instructors to interact with their students via audio and video content. Students can use a tool to "raise their hands" in order to be called upon to speak. There is also a chat option where students can type simultaneously. In addition to these three main functions, instructors can also share visual material with their students through the collaboration toolbar.

Blackboard Collaborate contains both video and audio tools. Instructors can browse the Internet while students watch and follow along on their computers. Word documents can be shared and edited collaboratively. The chat box function can be utilized if audio and/or video functions are not accessible from the user's computer.

The file editing and sharing is a weakness that our group struggled with during the project. The ability to work together collaboratively is hindered when our most powerful tools, Blackboard IM and Collaborate, are only available to us when we are online at the same time. Being in different time zones and on different continents, the current suite of Blackboard tools is not very conducive to group projects. Tight integration with Google Apps for Education or

Microsoft Office 365 would have allowed us to be more productive in our work by utilizing the powerful word processing and reviewing capabilities built into their products.

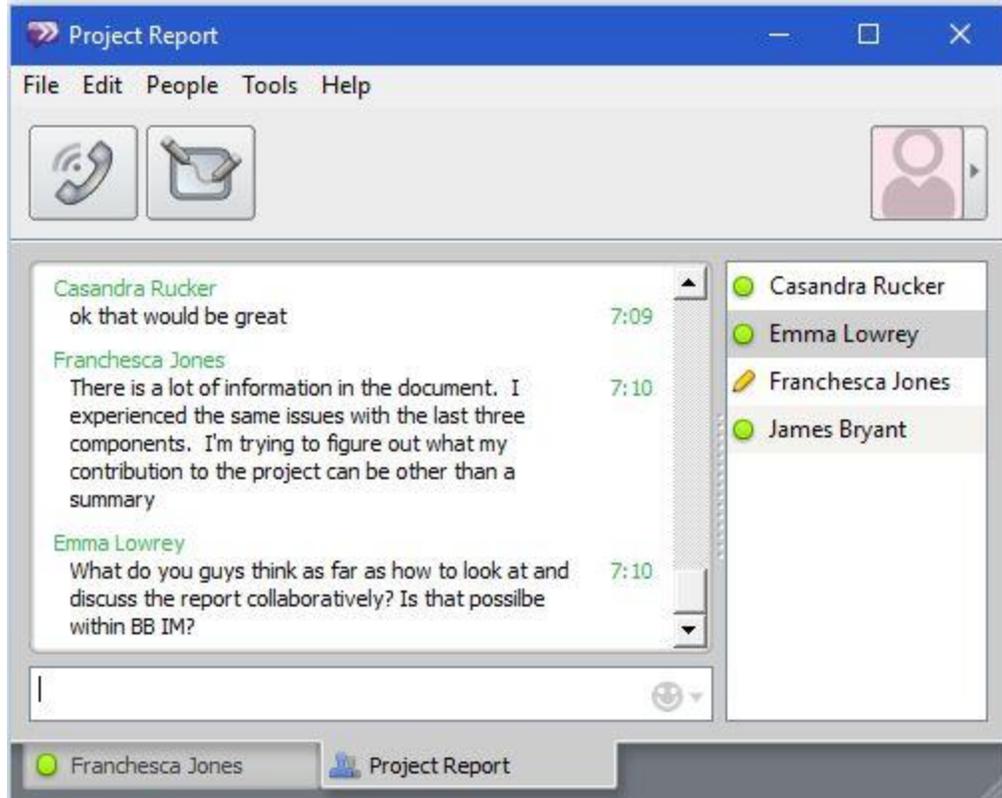
Tutorial

Chat/ Group chat tutorial

Note: Chat and Group Chat will be combined because their use is similar and the only major difference is how many participants are actively chatting.

To begin using the Chat tool, log in to the Blackboard IM application. Select individuals from your institution's preloaded classmate list or your condensed contact list by highlighting their names. When all individuals are selected, click the Chat icon  at the bottom of the status screen or select "Chat" from the Tools menu. The Chat window will open. If there is a green-dot next to the selected individual's name this indicates they are online and ready to chat (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

You can type your message in the bar positioned below the Chat window aptly titled the text input area, when your message is complete select



“Enter” on your keyboard. This will post your text to the message area making it visible to others ((Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

The Chat window allows for the addition of emoticons and hyperlinks to your text-based message. The emoticons are located on the far right of the text input bar and indicated by a gray smiley face and downward pointing triangle. By selecting this symbol, a listing of all available emoticons become visible. Simply select the icon you wish to use by clicking on it. Adding web addresses to text and posting them to the message area automatically converts it to a hyperlinked URL. This URL is an active link that can be clicked on and opens in a new window. Once a message has been posted, erroneous or undesirable posts can be removed by right clicking the post you want to remove and selecting Clear.

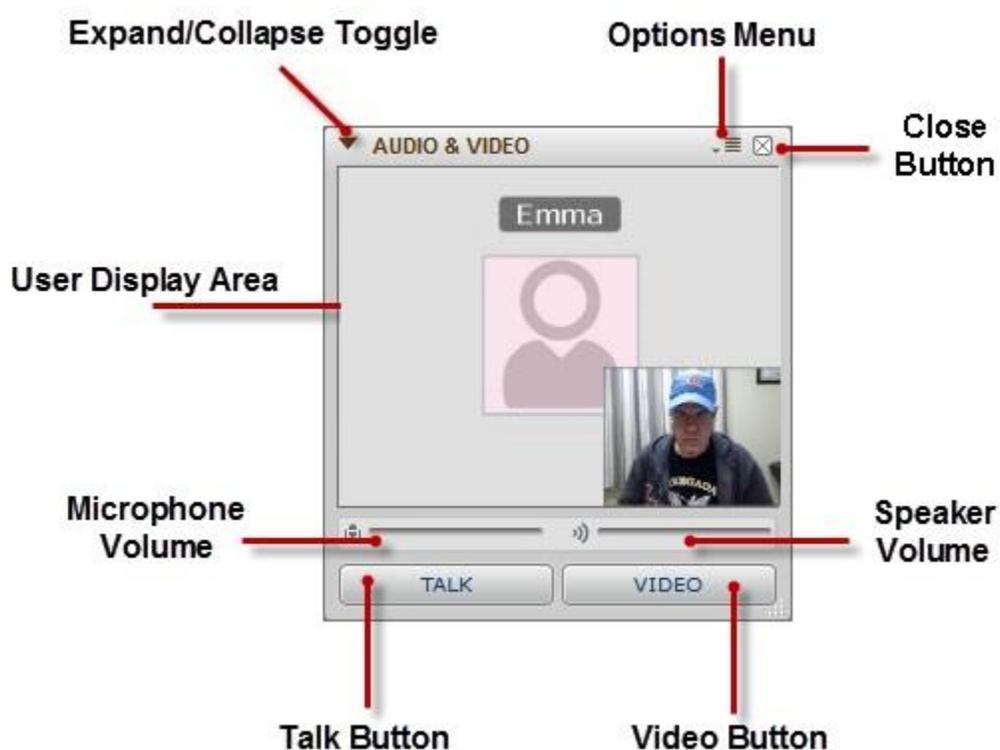
Ending a chat session can be accomplished by either clicking the close button in the top right corner of the Chat window or pressing Ctrl+F4 (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

Calling

Blackboard IM makes it simple to graduate from text-based communication to verbal communication. Before using this tool, you will need a sound card, speakers, and microphone or headset. If using the video component of the Call tool you will also need a video USB or integrated webcam (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

A “Call” can be accessed from the main Blackboard IM screen by highlighting

individuals from your contact list and selecting the call icon  located at the bottom of the status bar. Another option for initiating a call is to select the call icon while in the Chat window located in the top right corner. This feature differs from Chat, in that, the individual you called can either accept or decline your call. Once accepted, the Audio and Video window will open.

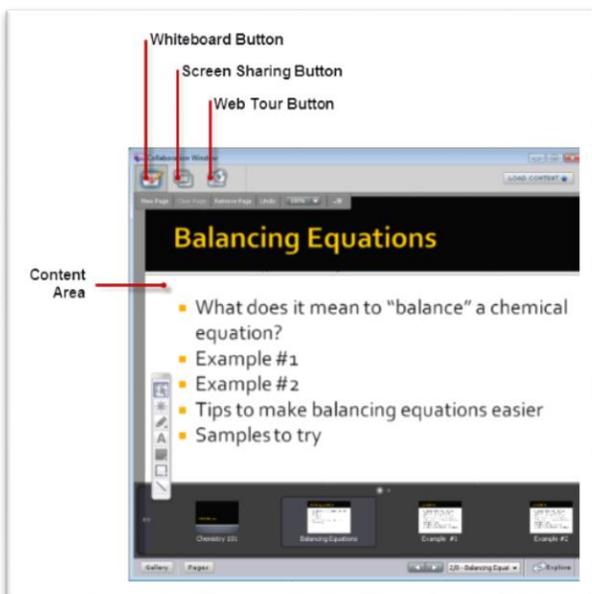


While using the audio component the display window will show the profile image of the user,. When using the video component it will display the webcam transmitted image. Above the user display area, there is a bar which contains expand/collapse functions, an options menu, and a close button. Speaker and microphone volume are displayed in bars directly below the user display area. Adjust the volume is achieved through the options menu (top right corner) which allows call quality to be changed in audio and video settings. The user can use the options menu to select Call Preferences. The Call Preferences contains functions such as echo cancelling, noise reduction, and auto gain control which keeps volume at an equilibrium by reducing fluctuations in high and low sound (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

The ability to hear and speak within the Call tool is controlled by the Talk button on the bottom left hand corner of the Audio and Video window. Blackboard IM help describes steps to use the Talk button which includes pressing and holding the Talk button while speaking (similar to using a walkie-talkie) or selecting ctrl+T. But, my experience with the Call tool merely required pressing the Talk button one time. To end a call, you can press ctrl+F4 or click the close button in the top right corner (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

Collaborate

The Collaborate tool includes Whiteboard, Screen Share and Web tour. These features are accessed through the Collaborate icon. Select the desired participants through the classmate or contact list. Then click on the Collaborate icon . The participants that you invite to the Collaborate session will have to accept your invitation. Once the invitation is accepted the Collaborate window will open.



To open and use Whiteboard, select the icon from the top left corner of the Collaborate window . Now the Whiteboard features are available. From the Whiteboard tool bar you can write, draw, add text, and modify objects. Files such as PowerPoint presentations can be loaded for viewing in the

Whiteboard tool. To do so, hover over the Whiteboard icon, the Action bar will appear., then select Load Content. A screen allowing you to select files from your computer will appear.

Select the desired file. It will then appear in a separate window. Whiteboard sessions can also be saved for offline viewing or for archival purposes.

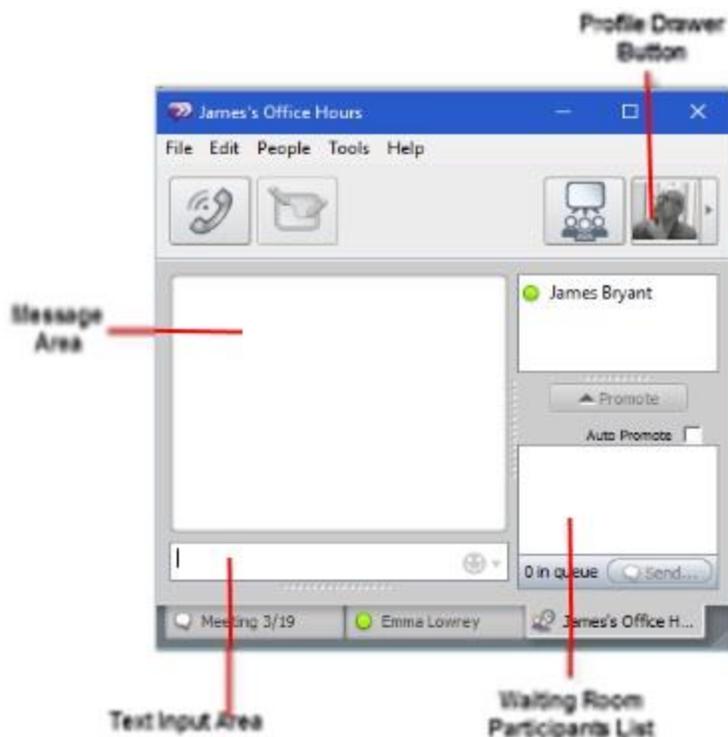
During group collaboration you can show your groupmates a group activity. The Screen Share feature of Collaborate allows you to show your computer screen to other members of the Collaborate session. To access Screen Share, select the corresponding icon from the top left

corner of the Collaborate window  and the Screen Share window will open. Your computer screen image immediately becomes visible to other members in the session. You have the ability to control which part of your screen to share by using the resizing frame. Adjust the size of the shared screen by dragging the edges of the frame to the desired size. If the activity warrants it, you can also share control of your cursor and keyboard. To do so, open the Action bar by clicking or hovering over the Screen Share icon. Select the desired participant from the Cursor drop down box

A Collaborate session may require viewing a website. This can be done within the Collaborate window which avoids each person having to access the address through their own computer. While in the Collaborate window select the Web Tour icon . A Web Tour Action bar appears. From this bar you can input the desired web address. For your desired website to be visible to other members of the session you must check the Follow Me box immediately to the right of the web address (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012). To end your Collaborate session, press Alt+F4 or click the close button in the top right corner. It is important to note that the session will still be open to others if they do not also close the window (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

Office Hours

Office hours is the final Blackboard IM tool to be addressed in this section. It will be divided into session owner tutorial and participant tutorial. A session owner is the initiator of the Office Hours session and with this designation comes increased control and options. Initiate a session by using the Status bar to select Office Hours. Selecting this option from the Status bar lets others know that your office is open. Users must request to join your session. For this session you can use default settings or customize settings to fit your needs. If you select Office hours from the status bar default settings are applied. To customize the settings, choose Custom listed directly below Office Hours on the Status bar. From here you have the ability to change when someone is promoted to the main room, the ability to allow users to chat while in the waiting room, and the ability to require a reason for joining a session among other things (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).



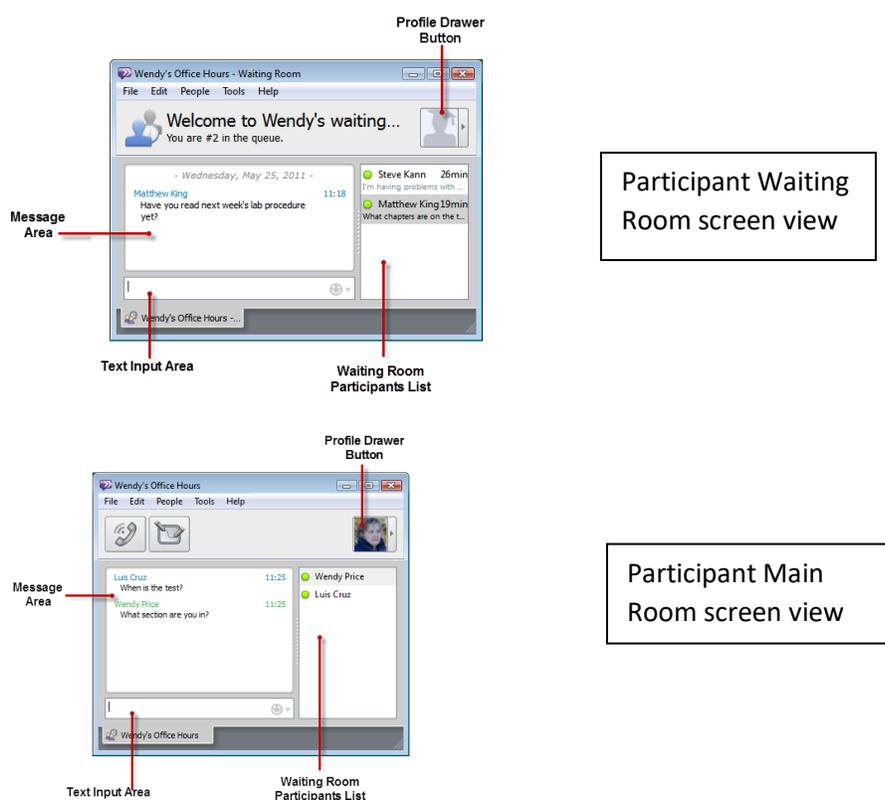
The Office Hours window for the session owner is comprised of four sections. The main room section, a list of main room participants, waiting room participants, and a waiting room chat window. Within the window Blackboard IM Call and Collaborate tools

are available with the same functionality as previously described. Once participants have requested to join the session their name and reason for joining the session populate in the Waiting room window. The session owner can then promote that participant to the main room to begin communicating with IM, call, or initiating a collaborate session. If multiple participants are in the waiting room, when you have completed a session with one you can demote them and promote the next participant. To promote a participant, highlight their name in the waiting room box and select the promote button. To remove that participant from main room, highlight their name in the main room participant box and select the demote button, located between the waiting room box and the main room participant box (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

To end an Office Hours session, click the close button in the top right corner. If participants are still in the main room, a five-minute window is granted to the remaining participant. If a participant is still in the waiting room, a warning box will appear once the close button is

clicked. A message can be entered for the waiting room participant. If no one is in the main room or waiting room, simply select close when prompted (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

Participants of an Office Hours session must submit a request to join the session and have a different screen view. From the participant's contact list, they will select the session owner's name and press enter. A chat window will open requiring the participant to select "join." The participant will then be prompted to enter a reason for joining the session. Depending upon the session owner's Office Hour settings the participant's promotion to the main room could be on a first-come-first-serve basis ((Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).



The Participant's screen view first takes him/her to the waiting room. In this screen the participant sees other members of the waiting room and can chat with them if these features are enabled by the session owner. Once they are promoted to the main room the view again changes.

Here they have the ability to chat, engage in a call or collaborate with the session owner (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

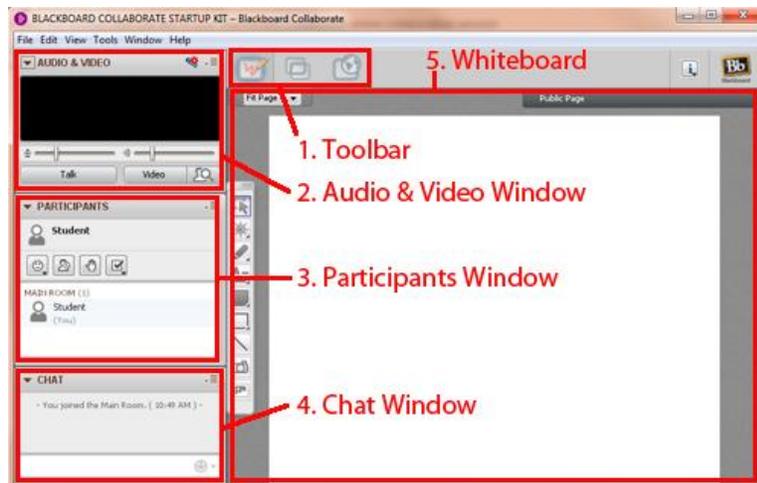
Web Conferencing

Web Conferencing is the nexus between Blackboard IM and Blackboard Collaborate. For further instructions on use see the Blackboard Collaborate tutorial below.

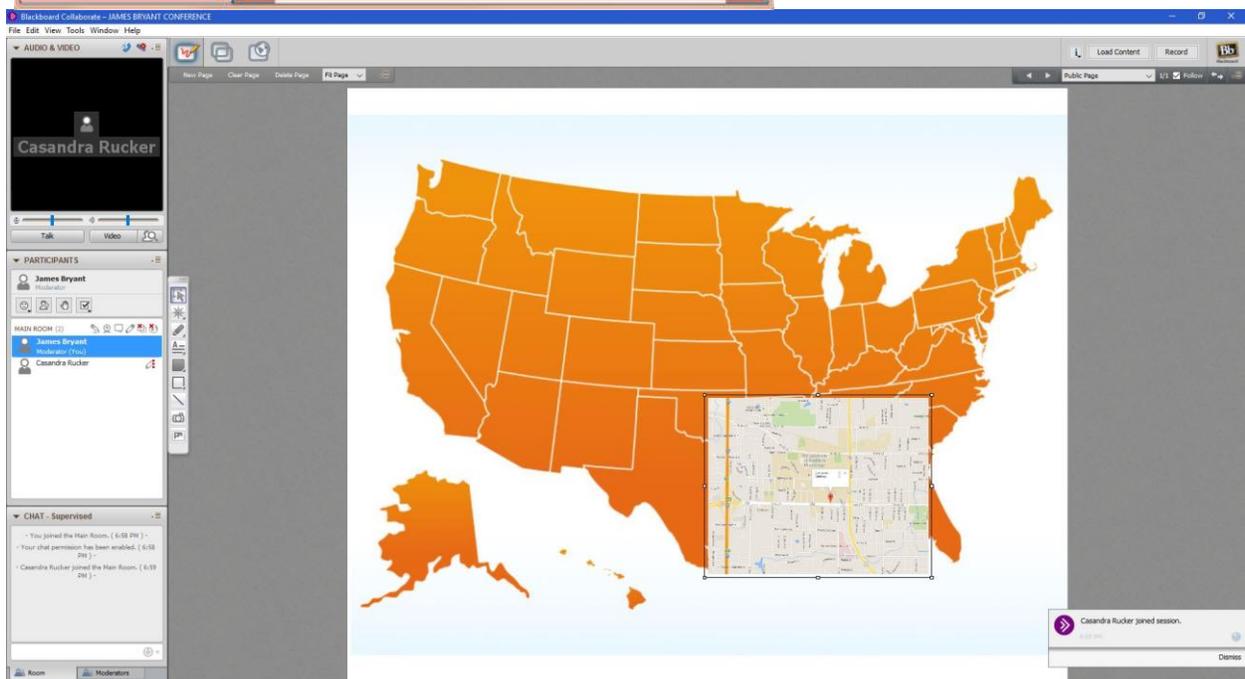
Blackboard Collaborate

As previously mentioned, Blackboard Collaborate allows instructors to interact with their students via audio and video content. Students can use a tool to “raise their hands” in order to be called upon to speak. There is also a chat option where students can type simultaneously. In addition to these three main functions, instructors can also share visual material with their students through the collaboration toolbar. There is a screen area in Blackboard Collaborate, known as the content area, where, through the collaboration toolbar, instructors can share web pages, applications or their entire desktops, or presentations and drawings. An example of using the web tour option within the Whiteboard function of Blackboard Collaborate:

The screenshot displays a Blackboard Collaborate session window. The main content area shows a web browser with the University of Southern Mississippi website. The website features a prominent banner for a lecture by Dr. S. James Gates, titled "RENOWNED PHYSICIST'S lecture will EXPAND YOUR UNIVERSE". Below the banner are several news items and navigation links. The Blackboard interface includes a toolbar at the top with "AUDIO & VIDEO" controls, a "PARTICIPANTS" list on the left showing "James Bryant" and "Casandra Rucker", and a "CHAT - Supervised" window at the bottom left. The chat window shows a message from "emma" stating "There are two diff applications going on right now."



An example of using the presentation option:



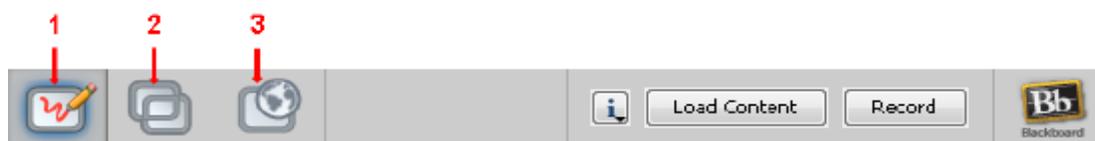
Blackboard Collaborate's audio and video sharing capabilities allow an online class to feel more like an in-person class. Users are able to hear and see other classmates and their instructor. Students join a session through logging into Blackboard, choosing the relevant course, and clicking on "Blackboard Collaborate" on the menu on the left-hand side. Once students are part of the session, it will look like this:

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¹ Image retrieved from: <http://distance.uvic.ca/onlinehelp/tutorials/collaborate/images/collaborate-layout.jpg>

As the above image shows, the audio and video box is above the list of participants, with the chat window below. While participating in class, students may be grouped by their instructor into smaller digital “rooms” in which they can discuss group projects or reading material.

If the instructor chooses to share content on what is referred to as the “whiteboard,” students will be able to view that as well. Depending on whether the instructor is sharing a web page, an application or his or her desktop, or a drawing or presentation, the relevant icon will feature color, as depicted below. Excellent, in-depth and printable tutorials about how to share content via the Whiteboard tool is available on Blackboard’s site at this URL address: http://en-us.help.blackboard.com/Collaborate/v12/Moderator/Conduct_a_Session/Share_Content



1. Whiteboard: Share presentations and drawings.
2. Application Sharing: Share individual applications or your entire desktop.
3. Web Tour: Share web pages.²

Advantages

Blackboard IM features

After the review and use of the Blackboard IM features noticeable advantages were observed. A positive aspect of Chat is ease of use. While Call was noted for its ability to provide a more traditional exchange, thereby making the communication seem more commonplace. In addition, speaking through the Call feature eliminates the need for typing skills and allows for a more rapid exchange. There is also an optional video component available to further enhance the communication experience. For Collaborate, some positive aspects include the ability to share

²Image retrieved from: http://en-us.help.blackboard.com/Collaborate/v12/Moderator/Conduct_a_Session/Share_Content

what is currently on their computer screen with other Collaborate participants in a way that is more practical and efficient than sending the document or image through email. Users also have the ability to save a Whiteboard session. Once saved, the session can be viewed later without an internet connection. Web Tour allows the user to take participants directly to the web address they intend with the 'Follow Me' feature. Finally, Office Hours is great for distance education. It mimics the one-on-one sessions that students in traditional learning setting have with their instructor. For online instructors dealing with communication fatigue, it allows them to set a specific time for communication with students (Sammons & Ruth, 2007). When students request a meeting within Office Hours, they are required to enter a reason for the appointment. The reason gives the instructor the ability to prioritize student promotion to the main room. Once in the main room Collaborate allows the instructor to assist students with lessons they may be struggling through.

One great advantage is that because synchronous communication can be established, this can promote a "sense of proximity even though participants may be geographically dispersed" (Doering, Lewis, Veletsianos, Nichols, 2008). The benefits of face-to-face communication can be replicated, as clarifications, opinions, explanations, suggestions, and feedback can be given in real time.

Another benefit is that students improve their ability to give and take feedback and interact with their classmates or teacher. Often students who are timid, introverted, or anxious can remain quiet throughout the majority of a course without being called out. In an IM setting, they could contribute to the completion of their mandatory assignments and interact with their classmates in a "comfortable environment to express and convey their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs" (Wang, 2009). Even if students do not feel comfortable using

the *video* or *audio* features, they can use the *chat* component and still be a contributing member to group planning and work.

A final benefit for students is that through continuous use of BB IM, their typing skills (speed and accuracy), writing (grammar, structure, and meaning), and vocabulary all have potential to improve. As with any endeavor, practice results in improvement of any skill. By communicating continuously through this platform, students' speed and accuracy in typing is likely to improve. Additionally, if they are in the academic frame of mind, they will pay attention to their writing, which will give them the opportunity to improve their grammar, structure and meaning. Not only will they focus on their output, but also the input they receive from their classmates. In a group setting for example, students are likely to be engaged because they will be more actively involved in discussion vs. a large group. Thus students will be practicing listening and reading skills, and also have the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary from their classmates' output.

Blackboard Collaborate features

Blackboard Collaborate is powerful in that it, of all the communication tools involved in the Blackboard platform, most closely mimics the experience of attending an in-person class. As someone who has completed many fully online courses using the Blackboard system, I have found Blackboard Collaborate to be the only tool used by my instructors thus far. If instructors only use the audio and video options, it is extremely user-friendly. That it also offers the Whiteboard area for those instructors more motivated, interested, and/or capable of providing visual content for their students during a session is an added bonus. While reading tutorials provided by Blackboard about the collaboration toolbar and how to share a PowerPoint file with

students in a Blackboard Collaborate session, it occurred to me that attending a Blackboard Collaborate session in which the instructor lectures about a PowerPoint they go through via the Whiteboard function would very closely mimic attending a similarly designed in-person class. This potential is a great advantage in a time in post-secondary education when online degree programs are popular, and an enriching learning experience delivered completely online is sought after by students.

Disadvantages

Blackboard IM features

The synchronous aspect of Blackboard IM is a double-edged sword. In distance education students and instructors can be spread across the globe. Not sharing the same physical location (i.e. a physical classroom) makes scheduling a real-time synchronous meeting very challenging.

A drawback noticed during the chat session is the low level of awareness of when another person is preparing a post. Multiple times during the learning activity, I began typing a response while my groupmate was still completing her initial post. It is the equivalent of interrupting a speaker while they are talking, but in this case not as obvious. Within the Chat window a small pencil icon appears to the left of the chatter's name if he/she is actively typing. Unfortunately, while in the middle of a chat it does not stand out.

Negative aspects associated with the call feature include increased system requirements and difficulty hearing. In order to use the audio and video component, in addition to an internet connection you will also need a sound card, a speaker, and a headset or microphone (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012). If using the video component, you will also need a webcam (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012). While talking with my groupmate, I struggled to hear her in some instances. Also, my groupmate noted a lot of background noise coming from my side. The Call feature does

suggest using the Call Preferences section to adjust audio quality (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012).

The following describe disadvantages of Collaborate. *Blackboard IM* warns users that while granting control in this feature one should not leave their computer unattended (Blackboard Collaborate, 2012) because allowing control of your computer to other participants while in Screen Share is not limited to the keyboard and cursor. A negative aspect of Web Tour is that the website you have directed participants to can be overridden by other members of the Collaboration window because everyone has the ability to use the 'Follow Me' feature. While acting as the screen- sharer, I experienced some technical difficulties. My Chat window remained open over the screen I intended to share. This was easily corrected by adjusting the screen share window size. Adjusting the window size allows participants to only see a designated region of your screen.

Aside from potential technical issues, students may also find it difficult to establish synchronous communication when required to meet at a specific time. Particularly with distance learning, students are spread throughout the globe in different time zones, and determining a meeting time which meets everyone needs can be an obstacle. However once synchronous communication is established, another issue lies in the habits of students and their traditional use of instant messaging.

Instant messaging has served the purpose of allowing people to communicate rapidly, and an aspect of this type of communication is often abbreviating language and creating acronyms to shorten longer phrases. While adapting language to allow for quicker communication is beneficial for entertainment and non-academic purposes, it could be problematic for educational purposes. Students will need to keep in mind that although they are communicating through a

platform which is traditionally utilized for non-academic communication, that when using IM for educational purposes they should focus on appropriate academic lexis.

In addition to focusing on their terminology, students will also need to focus on staying on task. Users of IM often multi-task, not only by holding several conversations simultaneously, but also by using IM while doing other things like watching television or videos, or running errands. To be completely engaged in the task assigned, students should eliminate distractions and extra activities unrelated to the assignment.

The pros and cons for students are more extensive than those for teachers, as BB IM is a student-centered application. A challenge that teachers would have with this program, is that they cannot float from group to group as they can with BB Collaborate, and they do not have as much one-on-one or face-to-face interaction with their students. Observing and assisting with work will be much more difficult. Students will have to save their whiteboards, screenshot their work or use a snipping tool to be able to submit visual work done through BB IM to their teachers. Another option for students to report back information to the instructor, is to access the instant communication tools such as chat, video, and audio. By students reporting their work through text/visual or oral output, they provide the teacher with information to analyze, to then provide feedback. This type of program is better suited for work that students need to complete as a group, without heavy supervision or assistance of the teacher.

Another obstacle an instructor might face when using BB IM is lack of experience with digital communication. Just as the students require tutorials, training and practice to be able to utilize BB IM with fluidity, teachers with lack of experience will have to undergo the same procedure. They should ensure that they are well versed with the application prior to requiring

students to utilize all of its functions. Once teachers have an understanding of BB IMs capabilities, the teacher can incorporate this program to accomplish many goals.

The tools available in the program allow for quick communication and collaboration, ideal for small group activities, research projects, presentation planning, preparation, creation, and delivery. Teachers can also assign tasks such as interviews, conversation practice, brainstorming, peer-review, test preparation, role play, reading practice, etc. This types of activities allow for the learners to do the work for themselves, allowing the instructor to promote student-centered education.

Blackboard Collaborate

One common challenge associated with Blackboard Collaborate has to do with feedback issues. If a student does not mute his or her microphone after contributing, there are often noise issues. Additionally, although theoretically a student may use his or her laptop computer to participate as long as the laptop has a built-in microphone and speakers, participating in this manner often results in difficulty hearing and/or being heard. It is also helpful to listen via headphones or earbuds, but a crucial thing to remember is to unplug your headphones and switch them to the microphone jack in your laptop whenever you wish to speak. Since the Blackboard Collaborate interface requires students to first raise their hands, wait to be called on by their professors, and then click on the audio or video button, also remembering to switch headphones from one jack to another may be problematic and result in an interruption in the flow of class. One possible solution that has worked well is to use two sets of headphones, one plugged into the microphone jack and one into the headphone jack. This should provide continuous clear audio input and output.

Another challenge with Blackboard Collaborate is the difficulty associated with attempting to use the collaboration toolbar. A possible solution to this issue may be to provide quick training sessions, or discuss departmental requirements for how online classes should be conducted. In the absence of such requirements, a broad range in the quality of material presented and the amount of teacher time dedicated to a course is likely to exist, and may starve students of a fulfilling class experience.

Instructional Integration

Some great examples of Blackboard Communication Tools integration into educational settings were provided previously in the learning activities section. But, in addition a potential instructional application for Blackboard IM, aside from group projects, could be a math tutoring session between the instructor and a student or between students. The Whiteboard could be used to write problems. Screen Share with cursor and keyboard control enabled could be used to allow the student to practice working the problem, which the teacher could correct if needed. The instructor could use Web Tour to guide the student to a math tutorial site that provides video explanations of relevant math concepts.

Blackboard Collaborate also offers limitless potential for enriching online classes. One teaching idea is to create a PowerPoint file providing an overview of the material to be covered in the relevant week of the class. A Collaborate meeting could be scheduled for the beginning of that week. Using the Collaborate presentation sharing tool, the moderator could work through the power point, while simultaneously using the video sharing option to narrate the presentation. The instructor could pause for questions and students could use the “raise hand” icon shown below.



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In this way, visual learners would be provided with visual content, while auditory learners would benefit from hearing the material. The option to ask questions at any point is also of huge benefit to learners. This introductory power point to the

week's material would help students have a context in which to place that week's readings and assigned videos, if any.

A final idea for incorporating Blackboard Collaborate into the classroom is to use the video, audio, and grouping options in order to conduct a discussion. This could take place after students are expected to have read material and/or watched videos. Discussions conducted via Blackboard Collaborate can be very helpful.

Summary

The Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) communication tools, Blackboard IM and Blackboard Collaborate, provide innovative learner-centered solutions for those lacking connectivity in distance learning. There are features that enable continuous dialogue in various formats, as well as, features that inspire and support group learning. With the abundance of online courses and fully online degree programs available currently, such software is extremely important. Through this project, we learned a great deal about the options available to professors. Though, the technology could be more stable in order for teachers and students to not lose valuable instructional time.

³ Image retrieved from: <http://distance.uvic.ca/onlinehelp/tutorials/collaborate/images/collaborate-raisehand.jpg>

In the future Blackboard could benefit by integrating both Google Apps for Education, and Microsoft Office 365 into the LMS. Some of the weaknesses that were noted were the ability to share files, and edit files as a group. The word processing functionality could benefit from better integration with the offerings available from Google and Microsoft. Since they are both free, the price is right for any education institution.

In conclusion, the suite of Blackboard tools is extremely powerful, and everything that an instructor may need is provided. They do need to be updated, and improved upon to compete with newer offerings from companies like Canvas, Schoology, and Desire2Learn. Blackboard is currently the leader in the educational LMS space, but they will need to continue to improve their product to maintain their market share considering the huge growth in online learning, and the plethora of new and innovative products being introduced to educators on a daily basis.

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