Beata Webb, Masanori Matsumoto, & Alicia Vallero

Active Learning with Collaborate Ultra

Students participate in a Blackboard Collaborate virtual classroom

The MA in TESOL program at Bond University features a flexible delivery mode that supports both online and face-to-face learners. Masanori Matsumoto, Alicia Vallero and Beata Webb explain how this program has embraced the use of Blackboard Collaborate, a tool that creates a synchronous online classroom environment.

Collaborate allows students and teachers to interact using video, audio, a chatroom and a screen which can include PowerPoint presentations, screen capture or a shared whiteboard space.

Describe what you did?

The MA in TESOL program is delivered in two modes, on campus and online. To address the challenges of delivering the program to students online we adopted Blackboard Collaborate Classic in order to create a virtual classroom environment in Semester 131.

Within the program, Blackboard Collaborate is used for virtual classroom sessions, tutorials, one-on-one consultations and as a student virtual meeting space. After two years using Collaborate Classic tool we decided to upgrade to Collaborate Ultra in Semester 153.

Why did you adopt Collaborate Ultra?

The release of Collaborate Ultra offered solutions to some of the problems we were experiencing with setting up the software, and bandwidth, audio and video issues. Our program delivers to students all over Australia, including cities, regional areas and remote communities. Worldwide, we have taught students in many countries including China, the US, Vietnam and Indonesia. Collaborate Ultra solved many problems associated with lower quality internet connections.

What do you hope to achieve?

We hope to provide students with an opportunity for synchronous online learning, and wanted to include interactivity, audio and video. Collaborate Ultra is the most powerful tool we have found for this purpose.

What were the benefits of this approach?

Collaborate is a powerful tool for teaching that promotes active learning. The level of interactivity and participation in Collaborate was greater than what was possible in a face-to-face class. Students are able to share the whiteboard at the same time, they can share links and resources immediately with others, and ask questions whilst in the middle of a lesson. This would be impossible in a face-to-face classroom environment.

During Collaborate sessions, students are able to ask or answer questions, share information and present their ideas and opinions. Students are also able to plan, work together and negotiate decisions.

There were social benefits too, with students expressing companionship, emotional support and giving advice to other students. One of the most surprising benefits is the intimacy of the online sessions. In spite of the online barriers, students were more comfortable as they connected to Collaborate from their own homes, rather than in a physical classroom environment. This promoted a greater sense of community and collegiality, which was appreciated by the students themselves who were pleasantly surprised.

Students interact with a slide

What seemed to work well?

Collaborate Ultra is simple, easy to use and has fewer connectivity issues than Collaborate classic. Students can now meet online as a group and take advantage of the online space anytime.

I have personally collaborated with other academics in Collaborate Ultra, held staff meetings and even uploaded, shared and developed presentations and papers with others, regardless of wherever people were located at the time.

Another feature of Collaborate that worked in well in a surprising way is the chatroom. This is possibly the richest platform for student exchange and collaboration. The students simply love it!

The chatroom always seems to be alive with back-channelling; students comment about the contents of the seminar, ask and answer each others' questions.

During the course, the atmosphere becomes more personal and it often becomes the space where people exchange funny comments and stories.

I love that Collaborate promotes internationalisation and nationalisation as students from around the country and around the world can participate in learning and building relationships.

> *"This is possibly the richest platform for student exchange and collaboration. The students simply love it!"*

What were the challenges?

Running a Collaborate session requires an immense amount of concentration to monitor all the multimodal aspects.

Moderators have to nominate students and manage input. Sessions can be quite exhausting and initially we required two moderators to effectively manage the class.

The lecturer delivers the content while the "producer" helps with answering questions and dealing with technical support.

One of the important challenges was developing the confidence to deal with technical issues and this only comes with experience.

One of the bigger challenges with Collaborate Classic was the initial setting up required by students, such as the installation of Java and troubleshooting audio connection issues, often only moments before the session is due to start.

Ultra has effectively addressed these issues and now provides a 24/7 access to the Collaborate room so students can more readily access this space and become familiar with using the software.

What feedback have you received?

The response from students has been absolutely fantastic with amazing feedback. Students have expressed surprise that they have built a community and feel part of it.

Students who attend the Collaborate sessions loved coming each week, and the opportunity to review the session afterwards through recordings.

Perhaps one of the limitations of Collaborate Ultra is that the chatroom is not recorded, which can affect the ability of students to understand some of what happens in the virtual classroom session.

We have also organised a seminar session with other colleagues around the university and it has been wonderful to share our ideas about this tool.

> *"The level of interactivity and participation in Collaborate was greater than what was possible in a face-to-face class"*

What advice would you give someone thinking of trying Collaborate?

Just do it! Initially make sure you have a person there to assist you until you build the confidence to run the session on your own.

Don't just use Collaborate for teaching a class, try using it for collaboration, online office hours, tutorials sessions or one-to-one support.

Ask for help, use peer support and ensure you receive adequate training before you start. We had considerable support from OLT and ITS which did make all the difference.

What's next?

We are awaiting new features to be added to Collaborate Ultra, such as the breakout rooms which were present in Collaborate Classic.

Hopefully the recording features will also be improved. In the near future we will publish a paper about our experiences with the MA TESOL program and the use of Blackboard Collaborate.
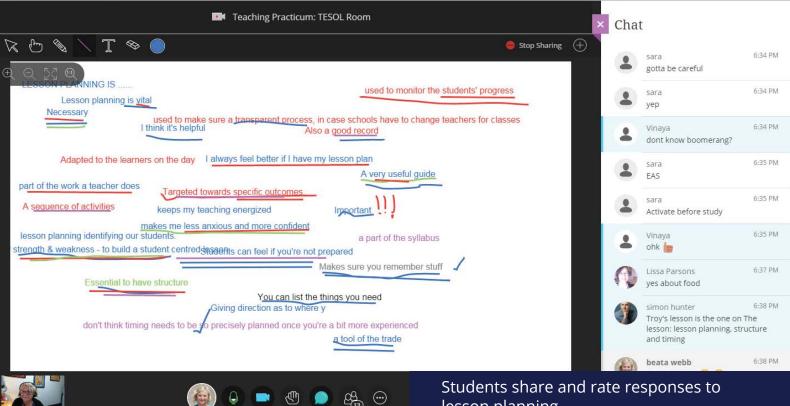
Any final thoughts or comments?

It has been incredibly rewarding to implement Collaborate into the MA TESOL program.

The team has developed new approaches, skills and expertise allowing us to develop a different style of teaching.

The overall experience has led to an incredible level of engagement and interactivity, creating social connectivity and access. ■

> *"The overall experience has led to an incredible level of engagement and interactivity"*

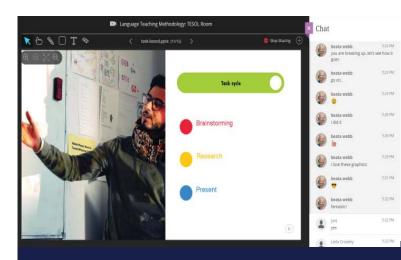Students share and rate responses to lesson planning

Beata has lectured in linguistics and language teacher education in Australia for over 25 years. Her research aims to improve understanding the nature of linguistically and culturally diverse student cohorts.

Beata's other professional interests include the use of technology in education and e-learning. She has delivered professional workshops and lectures in many countries including Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, China, Poland, and the UK.

A student presents an online to the class

Alicia is a native Spanish speaker born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her interest in language teaching and learning was inspired by her own experience learning English when she migrated to Australia in 1987.

Alicia's research interests are in pronunciation and culture in the classroom. She received her first teaching degree in Mathematics and IT in Argentina where she worked at secondary and university level teaching and developing a program to teach computer skills on TV.

Masanori spent 7 years in the banking business before teaching Japanese as a second language at language institutes in Tokyo. His interest in teaching Japanese expanded and brought him to Australia where he studied the Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics at Bond University.

After the completion of the degree, he started his doctoral research studies and joined the Faculty as an academic staff member. He completed his PhD at the University of South Australia, and continues to study students' motivation and successful second language acquisition.