Sheffield Hallam University

Building interaction into lectures using webinars

Using Blackboard Collaborate to enhance student engagement and interaction during distance learning

The aim

Students on a Foundation Degree/HNC course in ACES were predominantly members of staff from one particular organisation. This organisation needed to reduce the cost of attending classes (travel and accommodation). It wanted the University to consider ways of delivering parts of the course via distance learning..

Benefits

• Increased levels of interaction with students

• The ability to record the session and post on the Blackboard site

• Students don't have to travel to attend lectures

The approach

The tutor identified three lectures in the module that could be delivered online. Having recently attended a demonstration of Blackboard Collaborate he recognised its suitability for delivering distance learning.

The tutor prepared a test session and spoke to the students in advance to brief them on how the sessions would work. He provided details of how they could access the Collaborate sessions by circulating a copy of the Collaborate Participant's Guide along with a further instruction document he had developed specifically for these students. Initial reaction from students was positive with some trying to access the test Collaborate session during the discussion.

To deliver the lecture sessions, the tutor used PowerPoint slides that he had produced for previous onsite lectures as they integrate easily in to Blackboard Collaborate. He also made use of features such as online polling and live discussion by regularly asking students to confirm their understanding of the material using the tick/cross functionality and creating boxes on the whiteboard for students to place emoticons or comments. This helped him gauge whether the students were still engaging with the session and encourage further discussion. The tutor used his microphone and web-cam to deliver the session; most students participated via the interactive tasks and chat window, though a few utilised audio and video.

The outcome

Students engaged well with the online sessions and enjoyed the interaction throughout. One student said, "The interactive elements were what made it work for me, so glad it is going to be a bigger part of the next sessions." Another said "I thought it went very well and ... I had no real technology issues."

Using the whiteboard and chat window functions led to increased student engagement and interaction during the lectures. For example, when asked to vote whether they had enjoyed the on-line sessions; all students responded with the majority agreeing they had. Asked if the HNC students felt their engagement had been enhanced, the majority stated that it had with some saying that it enabled them to contribute to discussion in a way they couldn't in normal lectures or even in tutorials.

The tutor had some difficulty when using video clips during the session and there were compatibility issues with other technologies such as smart phone film footage. The session recording didn't include video that had been played during the live session due to the way it was included. However, on balance there were comparatively few technical problems for such a large audience. Session recordings were useful for students, particularly international students who are able to watch recorded sessions as often as required to support their learning and revision.

Overall, the tutor felt that there had been improved engagement from students, particularly within the HNC cohort. This was not just apparent during the Collaborate sessions but unexpectedly was also apparent during the final on-site sessions. Students were more willing to engage in discussion and voice opinions in debates of key issues.

Profile

Tutor name:
Tim Parker

Faculty:
ACES

Size of cohort:
Medium (30-50 students)

Technologies used:
Blackboard Collaborate, YouTube, webcam

If you would like your e-learning practice captured and shared in a similar case study, please contact Brian Irwin within Quality Enhancement and Student Success.

Future development

The module ran again the next year using Blackboard Collaborate and the tutor used video successfully and effectively as part of the sessions. He also increased the length of the sessions to include additional tutorial drop in sessions which proved useful to some students.

The tutor is keen to utilise recordings and Blackboard Collaborate further in the form of flipped lectures where the lectures are made available in advance of contact time.

Recommendations

The tutor advises anyone interested in this approach to:

- Try to have a dedicated moderator to support the session, particularly when working with large or highly active cohorts
- Check equipment prior to use for compatibility, ease of setting up and quality e.g. headset, webcam
- Consider your environment - a room free of distraction and background noise is essential
- Be brave, take risks, students are usually quite forgiving if things don't quite work as planned because they engage with the process and seem to like it