

# Action Research Report

## Building Confidence and Capacity in the Use of Virtual Classroom Technology

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### Introduction

This action research project was designed to provide members of staff with support and guidance on using the Blackboard Collaborate virtual classroom synchronous online learning platform in their learning and teaching. The intention was to raise awareness of the how the tool could be used to enhance the student experience and to build staff confidence by participating in an online session as a student.

### The Issue

The Higher Education landscape has changed considerably over the past 20 years. Following the Dearing Report (1998), tuition fees were introduced and subsequent governments have increased these meaning that the average student now pays around £9,000 per year for their University education. This in turn has led to a situation where students are seen as consumers and the notion of “value for money” is now prevalent.

In addition to this, the government white paper published in May 2016 “Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice” and the following Higher Education and Research Bill (2017) introduced sweeping changes to open up the HE market to alternative providers, offering students more choice and introducing more competition for Universities.

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework has put more pressure on Universities to be transparent about the quality of the education they are providing and whilst the merits of using a metrics based system can be debated (Ashwin, 2016), there is no doubt that Universities are accountable to their students more than ever before.

It has long been recognised that the use of technology in learning and teaching can improve the student experience, however it can also provide a greater degree of flexibility and efficiency and potentially open up new markets such as online and distance learning (Gordon, 2014). A HEPI report published in February 2017 “Rebooting Learning for the Digital Age: what next for Technology Enhanced Higher Education?” highlights a number of ways Universities can make the most of technology to improve the experience of their students, gain rich data to support the TEF and improve efficiency. (Davis et al, 2017)

Developments in technology have moved at a rapid pace over the past 20 years with most Universities providing centrally supported systems that can enhance learning and teaching. The UCISA Technology Enhanced Learning Survey 2016 reported 100% of UK Universities now have a Virtual Learning Environment. Other tools such as e-portfolios, whilst not ubiquitous are still widely used with 74% of Universities having a centrally supported e-portfolio tool, and 49% having a synchronous collaborative tool referred to in this research as the virtual classroom. (UCISA, 2016).

The University of Worcester has provided a Virtual Learning Environment for all courses since 2004 and this is now fully embedded within the core student experience. Baseline standards which outline minimum requirements were introduced in 2015 and the use of this tool is now an expectation for all modules. In November 2016 the Blackboard Collaborate Virtual Classroom was added to the suite of core tools provided and this was launched and promoted to staff through email announcements, launch events, blog posts and verbal updates. Initial uptake of the tool was however limited despite the many pedagogical benefits and opportunities for improved efficiencies this offered.

In 2015, the University of Worcester produced a strategy for Technology Enhanced Learning which states “it is clear that student expectations for learning are changing, and the learning landscape for higher education is rapidly becoming transformed through the use of digital technologies.” The strategy also set out five development priorities –

- Using technologies to enhance student engagement with learning
- Developing the digital fluency of staff
- Developing the digital skills and capabilities of students
- Electronic management of assessment
- Facilitating curriculum design for online learning opportunities.

This action research is intended to address the first three of these priorities by further embedding the use of technology in the curriculum to enhance student engagement and to address the digital skills gap of both staff and students by providing bespoke and intensive support when introducing a new tool for TEL. Given the initial limited uptake of Blackboard Collaborate, the methodology will assess reasons for lack of adoption, provide an intervention to improve confidence and understanding and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

### Literature Review

Virtual classroom technology allows tutors and students to communicate synchronously over the internet using audio, video, text chat and interactive whiteboard. A content pane allows tutors to upload files for their students to view, or to share an application on their desktop to demonstrate functionality.

Use of virtual classroom technology is well documented in the literature with many researchers focusing on the student experience of engaging in synchronous online learning. Morrow, Phillips and Bethune, (2007) report on the flexibility and convenience afforded by the tool to students in remote locations, whilst Cao, Griffin and Baj (2009) suggest that overall student satisfaction was improved by using synchronous interactions.

Pedagogical benefits reported include increased interactivity in online courses (Martin et al, 2012), enhanced dynamic interactions and encouraging the exchange of multiple perspectives (Park and Bonk, 2007), improved critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills (Marjanovic, 1999).

From the tutor perspective, Evans et al (2014) reported on the facilitators’ experience of delivering synchronous online sessions and concluded whilst the experience was mainly positive in perceiving student learning and self-development, facilitators needed additional training on strategies for student engagement and managing technological difficulties.

Martin and Parker (2014) examined the adoption of virtual classroom technology by academic staff and found that organisational factors such as support and resource availability played a large part in adoption. Ease of use was also important however social and personal factors such as peer support

and promoting a sense of community and a desire to enhance student learning and improve their own teaching were also significant.

There are many factors that can affect academic adoption of a new technology including age, level of education, teaching experience, digital capability, availability of technology and institutional support. (John, 2015). Other individual factors identified in the literature include skills and experience, innovativeness, tolerance of ambiguity and propensity towards risk taking. (Solomons and Spross 2011). King and Boyatt (2014) also identify a number of organisational factors including institutional infrastructure, strategy, sufficient resources and guidance for effective implementation.

Factors that can inhibit academic adoption are also well documented and include lack of time, lack of awareness and familiarity with a technology, autonomy and ability to access research. (Thanaraj and Williams 2016).

The human element around technology adoption is clearly a significant factor and developing the digital skills that staff need to support this has been the focus of much research activity in recent years (JISC, 2017). Furthermore, Beetham and Sharpe (2013) explored the challenges around implementing TEL and concluded that the key to successful TEL initiatives is in the human and organisational aspects of teaching and learning rather than on the technology itself.

The literature shows that virtual classroom technology is widely used in higher education and provides many benefits in both efficiency and learning and teaching. The factors that influence the adoption of new technology are complex encompassing both organisational and human elements however understanding these can be help when introducing a new initiative.

This research will focus on the staff experience and the intervention addresses the organisational factors that may be mitigated such as support and training. Individual factors are more complex and further research into how these could be addressed at an institutional level will be required.

## Method

### Preliminary Research

An online questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was developed to establish a baseline of staff knowledge and confidence levels with using synchronous online tools. The questionnaire was made available to all University staff and promoted by an announcement on the weekly staff newsletter and via a Blackboard announcement. The questionnaire also asked respondents to indicate if they would be willing to take part in further research to include dedicated training and support in the use of the virtual classroom tool and thus the sample group of staff for the research were self-selecting.

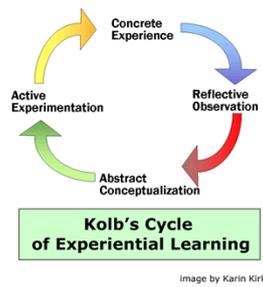
### Intervention

A webinar entitled “A practical guide to running a virtual classroom session” (see Appendix 2) was prepared with accompanying supporting materials in a Blackboard course environment. The session included demonstrations of all the interactive tools together with practical suggestions for how this might be used with students. Participants who responded to the initial questionnaire and indicated a willingness to take part in further research were contacted by email with an invitation to take part in the “live” webinar. A reminder was sent to all who had responded to the invitation the day before and the webinar was delivered online using the virtual classroom tool.

A number of apologies were received from participants who were unable to attend the live session so the session was recorded and the recording made available to all respondents to the questionnaire after the event.

The session was designed using Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) to underpin the approach.

Figure 1.



This involved providing participants with concrete experience of engaging with the technology in an authentic teaching situation and having the opportunity to experience a “live” virtual classroom session. The subject matter provided useful advice on the use of the technology but the real learning was in the actual physical experience of using it. The supporting resources and recording of the session were made available so that participants could reflect on and evaluate their learning, and the opportunity for active experimentation was available through their own module virtual classrooms.

### Evaluation

A shared document intended to simulate an online focus group was set up and circulated to participants four weeks after the virtual classroom session took place.

This posed four questions pertaining to participants' confidence and usage of the tool since the intervention. It also asked about planned future usage. (see Appendix 3.)

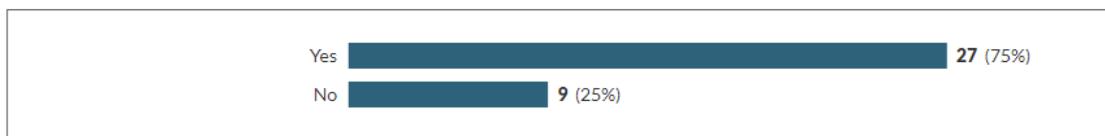
### Results

#### Preliminary Research

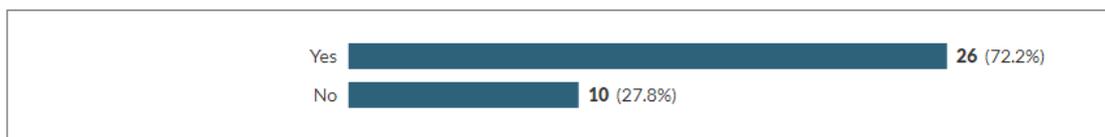
The preliminary survey received 36 responses in total.

Figure 2.

1 Have you heard of the Blackboard Collaborate Virtual Classroom tool?



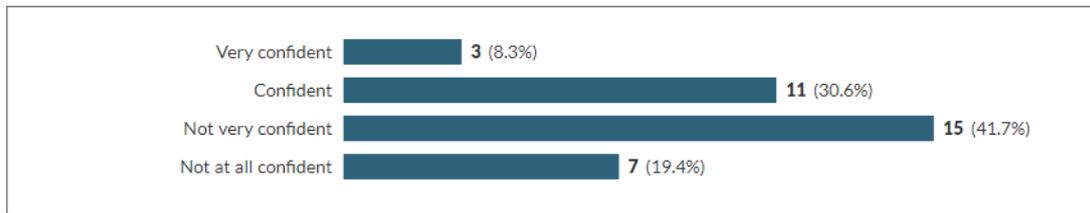
2 Have you ever used any synchronous online communication tools e.g. Skype, Adobe Connect, Blackboard Collaborate?



The first two questions addressed knowledge and awareness of Blackboard Collaborate and similar synchronous online tools such as Adobe Connect and Skype. 75% (n.27) of respondents had heard of Collaborate and 72.2% (n.26) reported having used a similar product before.

Figure 3.

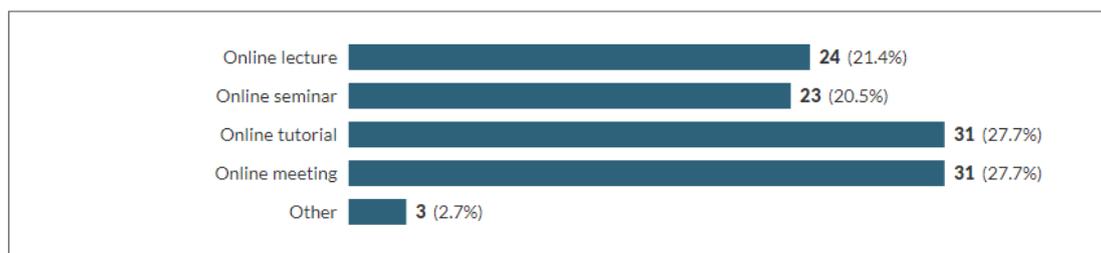
3 How confident do you feel about using a synchronous virtual classroom tool?



Question three asked about levels of confidence using a four point likert scale. The majority of respondents indicated low levels of confidence (69.4% n.22) whilst only 8.3% (n.3) indicated being very confident.

Figure 4.

4 With appropriate training and support, would you be interested in using Blackboard Collaborate to deliver any of the following (tick all that apply)



The question about potential usage of the tool gave respondents the option to select more than one option. There was also an “other” option to allow respondents the opportunity to provide alternative potential uses. The highest scoring options were the small-scale use scenarios of online meeting or tutorial with 27.7% (n.31) of respondents indicating those potential uses for both instances. There was still however relatively high levels of interest in all the proposed uses.

The “other” responses indicated usage for interviews and staff development sessions, and one respondent claimed that the software was not sufficiently reliable to be used at all.

The final question asked respondents if they would be willing to take part in the follow-up activities and of the 36 respondents, 28 (77.8%) responded positively.

### Intervention

Using the action research spiral (Cousins, 2009) the research question and following intervention were developed based on the responses to the initial survey. Given the low confidence levels of the respondents, the question “How can we build confidence and capacity in the use of the virtual classroom” was formulated.

By engaging the participants in using the virtual classroom as a student, it was possible to demonstrate all the potential uses and functionality and address any questions during the session.

In total, 11 participants joined the virtual classroom session at some point (some joined part-way through) and made good use of all the interactive features.

At the end of the online presentation, the session was opened up for questions and whilst some interactivity had been built into the session, at this point the participants became enthusiastic and keen to try out different scenarios using the interactive functionality. All participants had both audio and video activated at this point and the session became much more of a collaborative exercise and conversation rather than a taught session.

### Evaluation

Whilst the invitation to provide feedback via the online document was sent to all 36 of the original respondents to the survey, only six of these contributed to the virtual focus group.

All six had received training in Collaborate: four in the online session, one face-to-face and one had both face-to-face and online training.

All participants responded positively to the question about improved confidence. Two of the respondents said that trying out some of the additional functionality such as breakout rooms and polling in the online session had improved their confidence and another commented that they had felt confident enough to cascade the training to colleagues.

In response to the question about use since the training, only one participant had actively used the tool

“Yes, for providing training to partner colleges and UW staff. Also used in place of face to face meetings or telephone conversations”.

Another participant had attempted to use the tool but had experienced technical difficulties.

“To some degree; the classroom did not work possibly due to partners’ network”.

Responses to the question regarding planned future use was very positive with all respondents indicating some level of use in the next semester. Some of the comments focused on the practical benefits of flexibility and convenience:

“I would like to use it to facilitate some inter-professional learning between part time students who might otherwise find it difficult to come together”

“I would like to use it to support partners and possibly to enable students to join sessions when they are unable to travel.”

Although distance learning is not widespread across the university at the moment one comment directly referred to this:

“Yes. I would like to use it to run some of our Researcher Development Sessions online, particularly for our distance learning students and those who study part-time who may not always be able to access these sessions face-to-face. We have also considered using it for a Virtual Open Day, but I’m not sure I have the expertise to do that yet!”

Many of the comments also referenced enabling access to students who may not otherwise be able to participate highlighting how the virtual classroom can promote inclusivity and equality of opportunity for all students.

The final question asked for any other comments about Blackboard Collaborate. One respondent said that they would need further support and one required technical advice about why they had

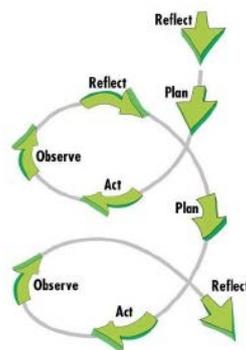
experienced issues, however overall the response was very positive with one respondent commenting:

“I think it’s a great addition to the VLE, hopefully it will be well received by students too!”

## Discussion

Action research is an iterative, reflective and cyclic process which allows researchers to undertake a systematic approach to improve their practice (Cousins, 2009). The spiral model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) highlights the importance of multiple stages which build on the observations and reflections of previous stage. This research is currently at the first stage of this cycle and further reflection and evaluation is required to build on the current study and move the initiative forward.

Figure 5.



Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)

This was a small-scale study and whilst the response to the initial survey was promising, the subsequent participation in the live virtual classroom session and feedback for evaluation purposes was disappointing. This is likely to be due to the timing of the study which was initiated at the end of the academic year. Many academics were busy with marking and as most teaching for the year had finished, opportunities to try the virtual classroom out with students were limited. The next iteration of the study will be timed so that there is more potential for academic engagement.

Whilst the response to the initial survey was good, as a self-selecting sample, it is likely that those who were interested and experienced in the use of technology were more inclined to respond to the questionnaire than those with no interest or awareness thereby introducing self-selection bias (Lavrakas, 2008). For the purposes of this phase of the action research it was not problematic as early adopters are more likely to have a positive experience of using technology (Anderson et al 1998), however it does pose the question for further research how to reach those staff who may not be keen to adopt a new technology.

Implementing a new technology requires a change management approach in order to ensure widespread uptake and effective use. Anderson et al (1998) note that comprehensive adoption strategies need to take into account the incentives, training programmes and barriers that can affect academic attitudes towards engaging with a new learning technology.

The research aim of improving confidence and capacity in the use of the virtual classroom has been fulfilled to some extent although it is difficult to generalise with such a small sample of those who

provided feedback. The authentic learning experience of participating in a virtual classroom session and trying the interactive tools first hand appears to have been effective and valued by participants thus improving their confidence. Lombardi (2007) claims that “learning by doing is generally considered the most effective way to learn” and this supports the constructivist approach to learning.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the current climate of increased competition and marketisation in Higher Education, Universities need to maximise their use of technology in learning and teaching in order to improve efficiency and enhance the student experience.

The Blackboard Collaborate virtual classroom tool has the potential to add value both pedagogically and practically and ensuring that academic staff are aware of the affordances and confident in the use of this tool will ensure the University has a good return on investment.

This action research project has highlighted how a structured, authentic learning approach to providing support and training for a new technology can help to improve confidence and raise awareness amongst academic staff.

Moving forward, the session delivered was successful in both promoting the virtual classroom tool, and improving confidence through active engagement. This will therefore be repeated as part of the Learning and Teaching Technology Unit’s staff development offering next semester at a time when hopefully more staff will be able to engage.

In addition, it has been found that the tool can be used with remote participants for a number of different purposes and therefore embedding its use in daily practice (e.g. replacing a phone call with a Collaborate session) can further demonstrate how its use can serve a range of purposes.

Whilst this research has primarily concentrated on the staff experience of using synchronous online technology, future research could examine the student experience and seek to identify factors which promote student engagement and learning in an online environment.

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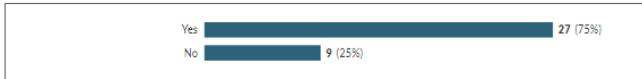
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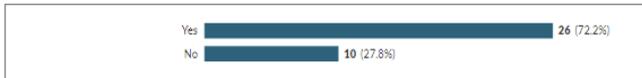
## Appendix 1 – Preliminary Questionnaire

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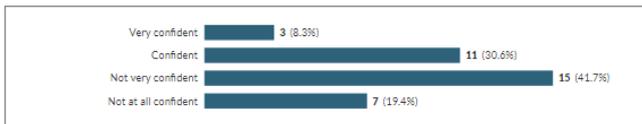
1 Have you heard of the Blackboard Collaborate Virtual Classroom tool?



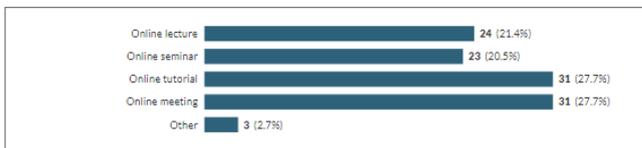
2 Have you ever used any synchronous online communication tools e.g. Skype, Adobe Connect, Blackboard Collaborate?



3 How confident do you feel about using a synchronous virtual classroom tool?



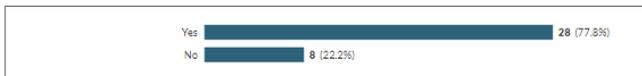
4 With appropriate training and support, would you be interested in using Blackboard Collaborate to deliver any of the following (tick all that apply)



4.a If you selected Other, please specify:

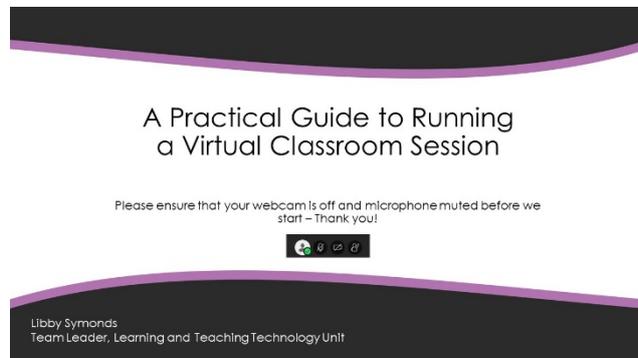
Showing all 3 responses	
None blackboard collaborate and virtual classroom do not work with sufficient reliability to be useable	262053-262045-22344852
Interview	262053-262045-22488168
staff development session	262053-262045-22498287

5 Would you be willing to take part in an action research project that would provide training and support to help tutors get started with using the Collaborate Virtual Classroom? You can find a full information sheet here providing details of what would be expected of participants.



## Appendix 2 – Virtual Classroom Session Slides

Link to the recording of the session <https://eu-lti.bbcollab.com/collab/ui/session/playback/load/B0CBDAD51C80EE6FD034E94F7572AE9D>

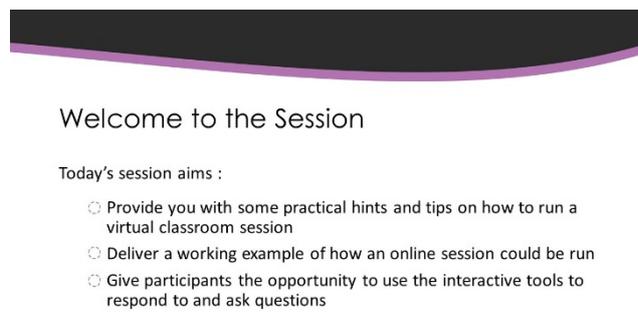


A Practical Guide to Running a Virtual Classroom Session

Please ensure that your webcam is off and microphone muted before we start – Thank you!



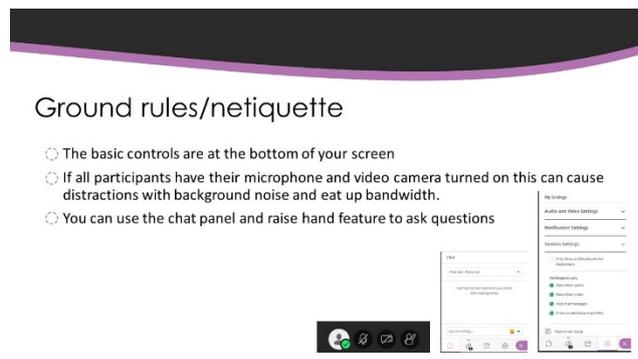
Libby Symonds  
Team Leader, Learning and Teaching Technology Unit



### Welcome to the Session

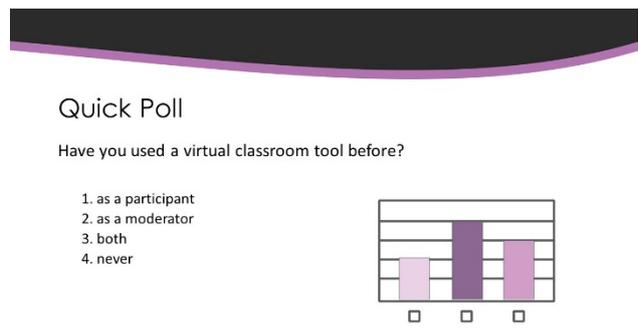
Today's session aims :

- Provide you with some practical hints and tips on how to run a virtual classroom session
- Deliver a working example of how an online session could be run
- Give participants the opportunity to use the interactive tools to respond to and ask questions



### Ground rules/netiquette

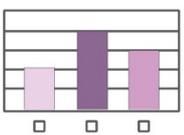
- The basic controls are at the bottom of your screen
- If all participants have their microphone and video camera turned on this can cause distractions with background noise and eat up bandwidth.
- You can use the chat panel and raise hand feature to ask questions



### Quick Poll

Have you used a virtual classroom tool before?

1. as a participant
2. as a moderator
3. both
4. never



Response	Count
1. as a participant	2
2. as a moderator	4
3. both	3
4. never	0

## Why use Collaborate?

- Convenience
- Flexibility
- Guest speakers
- Timetabling
- Supporting resources in the Collaborate Training Blackboard site

## What are you hoping to use Collaborate for?



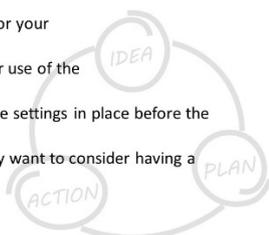
## Think about your audience



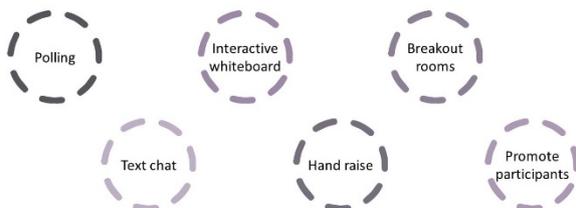
- How many people will be attending your session?
- Too many audio video feeds can be distracting if you have more than 4 participants
- 1-1 tutorials and small meetings or seminars can benefit from two way video

## Preparation

- Be clear about the learning outcomes for your session
- Include some interactivity like polling or use of the interactive whiteboard
- Plan your session in advance and get the settings in place before the session starts
- If you have a lot of participants you may want to consider having a moderator to field questions.



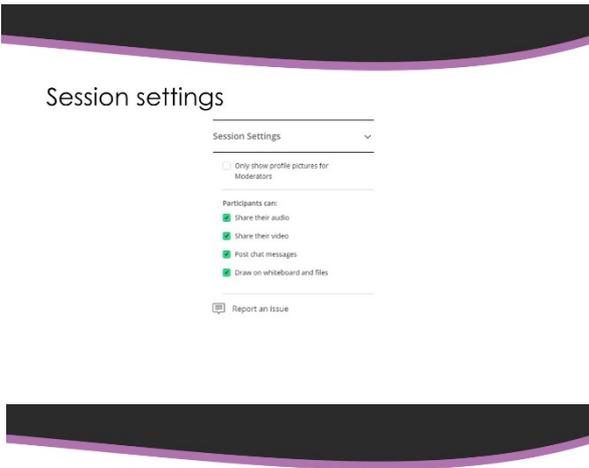
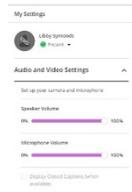
## Possible activities in Collaborate





## Audio and Video

- Test your audio and video settings in advance
- You can preview your video – make sure you’re not too close to the camera and there are no distractions in the background
- Ensure you have a good microphone or headset – good sound quality is key to a good online session



## Accessing the session



## Sharing content in your session

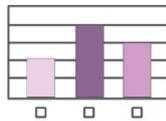
- ⦿ You can share images, PDFs or PowerPoint slides up to 60mb
- ⦿ You can also share an application or your desktop
- ⦿ Need to have a browser extension (only in Chrome or Firefox)



## Actions

As a result of this session do you think you will:

1. do nothing
2. try out collaborate with a colleague
3. try out collaborate with a student
4. use collaborate with a group of students



Please type any other ideas in the chat panel

## Questions

- ⦿ If you have any further questions please use the raise hand tool
- ⦿ Un-mute your microphone and turn on your video (if you would like to) when you're ready to speak



## **Blackboard Collaborate Virtual Classroom - Virtual Focus Group**

Thank you for taking the time to contribute to this discussion - please add your responses to the questions below and feel free to any comments or responses posted by others.

**Libby Symonds**

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**Did you take part in any training activities for Blackboard Collaborate?  
(please state if online or face to face)**

**Do you feel more confident now about using the virtual classroom?**

**Have you used the virtual classroom since taking part in the training and if so, what was the purpose and who participated?**

**Do you have any plans for using the virtual classroom as part of your learning and teaching for next semester? If so, what activities do you think you will use it for?**

**Do you have any other comments to add about Blackboard Collaborate?**