Online interaction: more than just another good idea

Since the current format of online education was in its infancy—as far back as the late 1990s—experts and pundits have consistently (and vociferously) pronounced that synchronous learning technologies like web conferencing and instant messaging are valuable for students. After all, these learning technologies allow those taking online courses to have greater interaction with their instructors and classmates. But few have discussed (at least until now) just how online courses with increased interaction, engagement, and communication can tangibly benefit learners.

Some have neared this discussion. A 2009 study by the National Staff Development Council found that professional development is most effective when teachers actively engage in collaborative professional communities focused on instructional improvement and student achievement.1 Accepting that this is the case, does increased online interaction impact students as well? While greater collaboration sounds like a good idea, what exactly does it lead to? How exactly is it beneficial?

Now we know.

Online interaction gets results: improved student outcomes.

Improved grades. Improved exam scores. Improved graduation rates. Higher school rankings. Schools of all shapes, sizes, and missions have found many examples of improved student—and even school—outcomes as a direct result of using the web conferencing, voice authoring, and enterprise instant messaging capabilities of the Blackboard Collaborate™ platform.

Better grades, fewer course drops in the California Community College System

With 2.9 million students and nearly 100,000 faculty and staff at 112 campuses, the California Community Colleges System is the largest education system in the world. Not only has it used Blackboard Collaborate to conduct more than 100,000 live online meetings since 2003, it most notably used it to help its students improve their grades. CCC Confer is the organization that runs the system’s online collaboration and learning initiative. According to CCC Confer Project Director Blaine Morrow, with Blackboard Collaborate, the system has significantly grown student success rates, enabling them to earn better grades. And because their highly-engaged students are more successful, they don’t drop out or withdraw, but rather tend to remain enrolled. Increased interaction in online courses has allowed the system to retain more than 10,000 students annually and increase retention rates to higher than 90%.

“We initially created CCC Confer to save time by holding meetings online, but we expanded courses, too. One of our instructors conducted a two-year survey and found that courses that were taught online with a synchronous component had a higher retention rate, success rate, persistence rate, and students earned more As and Bs,” says Morrow.2

In 2010 and 2011, Dr. Amelito Enriquez, a professor of Engineering at Canada College (part of the California Community Colleges System), taught an engineering course to face-to-face and online students simultaneously by using Blackboard Collaborate. Even though all his students lived near the Canada College campus, Enriquez discovered that many found it more convenient to take the class online, rather than commute to the school. In addition to saving time, he found that those students who took the course live online performed just as well as their classmates who attended face to face. In fact, online students had final exam scores and final grades that were identical to those of their in-person classmates. Enriquez noted that 65% of his online students reviewed the archived recordings of each class weekly when studying, whereas 30% their face-to-face classmates only watched archives every other week, and 25% watched archives monthly. It was this additional review that kept the performance of his online students high, and these recordings were only possible because they were captured in Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing.3

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3 Enriquez, Dr. Amelito, “Effectiveness of Dual-Delivery Mode Using CCC Confer.” CCC Confer Case Study. 2011.
Blue Mountain Community College helps one student turn a fail to a pass

For some students, the interactive capabilities provided by Blackboard Collaborate-powered classes can spell the difference between success and failure, as Oregon’s Blue Mountain Community College (BMCC) found. “We had a student who flunked Math 111 online twice,” recalls Bruce Kauss, Distance Learning Specialist at BMCC. “She joined a third time, and this time it was held via Collaborate, and she was successful. She thanked us for helping her succeed.”

Giving students the boost they need at NYU-Poly

Across the country, Polytechnic Institute of New York (NYU-Poly), relying on Blackboard Collaborate, created an eMath Forum. The online forum provides conditionally-accepted, first-year General Studies students who did not meet the traditional admissions requirements with a highly interactive, challenging online summer math program. The eMath Forum bridges the gap between students’ high school math skills and the skills needed to navigate through the rigor of a challenging STEM curriculum at the university level. The results speak for themselves, with 98% of the students successfully completing the eMath Forum. What’s more, 97% of students who completed the program are currently enrolled at NYU-Poly.

The faculty perspective at the University of Findlay

In 2011, instructional technologists Mike Shaffer and Scott Trimmer of the University of Findlay presented the results of an extensive survey of faculty they support. Trimmer and Shaffer found that 78.8% of faculty said that Blackboard Collaborate improved learning in their courses, and 94% of faculty would recommend Blackboard Collaborate to other faculty.

Student success around the globe

Half a world away, instructors at Australia’s Southern Cross University found that 82% of their students said classes live online were “the same, somewhat better, or far better” in quality than asynchronous-only online courses. But can live online interactions even exceed in-person interactions? Yes, according to Southern Cross. 90% of participants felt that the effectiveness of synchronous meetings was “the same, somewhat better, or far better” than face-to-face meetings.

Also Down Under, Victoria University teaches English and Australian customs and traditions via Blackboard Collaborate to students at multiple schools in China. By the end of the 2011 program, the results were astounding:

- 88% of students said their confidence in speaking English improved after participating in the program
- 53% of student reported “some improvement” in their English communication skills
- 35% of students reported “much improvement” in their English communication skills

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Voice authoring for language skills improvement

Teresa MacKinnon and her technology team at the University of Warwick (United Kingdom) support their language faculty, who rely heavily on Blackboard Collaborate voice authoring. This capability allows instructors to create a more engaging and effective asynchronous environment by adding a voice component that facilitates vocal instruction, collaboration, personalized coaching, and assessment. As a result, language instructors have, for years, seen great improvement in their students’ performance.

“When there was a fit between [Blackboard Collaborate voice authoring] and the need, we saw tremendous results. One student said, ‘It was useful to have a chance to review the material from classes and practice listening’ and another said, ‘It helped with revision.’” MacKinnon says. “They understood that Blackboard Collaborate gave them a better understanding of the language and a greater ability to speak accurately and communicate well in the language.”

At Warwick, the quality of student performance makes the investment in Blackboard Collaborate well worth it. MacKinnon adds, “I am satisfied that we are getting a good return on our investment. We will use the tools this year with as many as 1,500 students, and our business school has around 2,000 distant students using them, too.”

K12 students succeed with Blackboard Collaborate

It has long been held that younger students — those in primary and secondary school — need more personal attention than college students. Blackboard Collaborate can help make this type of personal attention more readily available and make it easier for teachers to provide, thereby widely improving the quality of K12 instruction, even at traditional face to face schools.

Extra help, after school, at home, at Central West Bucks High School

At times, 90 minutes just wasn’t enough time for Charlie Cappelli to grasp a difficult concept in his Advanced Placement Statistics class. That’s why Cappelli, a senior at Central West Bucks (Pennsylvania) High School, was so grateful for an innovative technology program initiated by teacher Leanne Schrier. By attending an online “virtual classroom” run by Schrier at night, Cappelli was able to make it through the class’s final semester. “It helped reinforce the materials we learned in class,” said Cappelli, who was recently featured in a video presented to the Central Bucks School Board. “With the speed of an AP class, the webinar gave us extra study time.”

Superintendent Dr. N. Robert Laws called the embryonic program ‘spectacular.’ “So often we hear of the mythical teacher whose job is 8 to 3,” said Laws. “This is the kind of stuff that goes on and no one notices.” Schrier uses the virtual classroom for review sessions before major assessments. Students can choose to participate if they have specific questions or listen in to questions other students might have.

Schrier pioneered the system in her Advanced Placement Statistics class, holding five sessions, each lasting up to two hours, with between 15 and 20 students participating at any one time. In all, 30 of her 44 students attended at least one session. This semester, Schrier has expanded the program to include her AP Geometry and Accelerated Pre-Calculus classes.

Senior Christine Prouty said she never knew learning at home could be so fun. “Everything runs smoothly,” she said. “It’s so easy to participate and ask questions. I’ve never had a class before where I was able to have a review at home that was so informative and helpful.”

Schrier tries to keep each session student-focused. She schedules them at a time that is most convenient for her students, and lets them steer the direction of material covered. As for the time she spends at night online, Schrier said she’s happy to do it because of the positive feedback from students and parents. “It’s a powerful and valuable tool for my students,” she said.

Like Schrier, Central Bucks West English teacher Lucy Hammel will continue to rely on Blackboard Collaborate because it helps her help her students grasp difficult concepts that require additional explanation and attentiveness. Hammel believes that the virtual classroom is a place where relationships are formed and where no one is judged by a name brand or a hair style. She recalls closing one English class by pushing out a five-question quiz that she created in Blackboard Collaborate to assess her students’ understanding of the novel themes, setting, and background. She knew immediately which students grasped the concepts and which ones did not.

10 Ferry, Joe, “CB West Teacher Brings Classroom Into Students’ Homes.” Doylestown-Buckingham-New Britain Patch. February 15, 2011.
South Carolina Virtual School Program helps its students get and stay ahead

In a state with an average success rate (the percentage of students passing their courses) hovering around the 65% mark, a success rate of 88.8% sounds almost too good to be true. But the reality is that the South Carolina Virtual School Program (SCVSP) has far exceeded state averages, thanks in large part to a full curriculum of highly-engaging and effective online courses powered by Blackboard Collaborate.

Operated since 2007 by the South Carolina State Department of Education to improve graduation rates, SCVSP enables students to take up to three fully-online courses each year in order to get ahead or to get help if falling behind. SCVSP, ranked 2nd in the nation for online guidelines, policies, and accessibility by the Center for Digital Learning, offers a full curriculum across all subjects, allowing students to re-take a class they might have failed, or to take an AP course that may have been cut from their regular schools due to budget shortfalls.

To make its virtual classes—held entirely online—as effective and engaging as possible, SCVSP relies on Blackboard Collaborate. Each year, 20 instructors teach more than 10,000 students living throughout the state. They engage via audio, video, and application sharing to ensure each class is highly collaborative because, as the school has discovered, the better the students perform. And with SCVSP’s 88.8% success rate, this rings truer than ever.12

Successful online professional development

Blackboard Collaborate also helps beyond the classroom: it’s effective as a K12 professional development tool, as well. When the Harris County (Texas) School District faced budget cuts that eliminated a significant portion of travel reimbursement for staff development meetings, David McGeary and his fellow instructional technologists quickly turned to Blackboard Collaborate as a means of holding the same meetings live online. Success came quickly. Not only did they save money, but the quality of the meetings was incredibly high.

“The one thing our faculty indicate is that interactions within Blackboard Collaborate are the most valuable part of their online professional development experience,” McGeary reports.

In fact, the online professional development sessions were so effective that, in 2011, Harris County began helping schools across the United States conduct similar online sessions. “This expansion started to occur when we began implementing synchronous resources. We started covering more of the state of Texas and could offer a lot more topics. We’ve now taught educators in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Maine, Florida, and even California. We’ve expanded nationally,” McGeary says, proudly. “Now that we’ve come up with a solution for providing effective professional development we can expand to other countries. A 2009 Cadman Study shows 95.2% of all organizations believe that a synchronous environment is a necessity. And that synchronous component can’t be one way.

“I’ve found that student success most often depends on the ability for individuals to interact, but to do so in a way that’s straight-forward and easy,” McGeary adds. “Having a synchronous environment is incredibly important.”13

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Improving lives, saving lives

Some successes can’t be measured in numbers.

According to Bradley Mitchell, Technical Support and Training Manager of the South Carolina State Department of Education Office of eLearning LMS, in 2009, a student in South Carolina had liver disease. Leading up to her liver transplant, she took courses online as part of the South Carolina Virtual School Program (SCVSP) so she didn’t have to fall behind her classmates as she awaited her surgery. During her recovery after a successful transplant, doctors wouldn’t allow her to go back to school out of fear of germs and infection. SCVSP officials permitted her to take a full Blackboard Collaborate-enabled course load online (students can normally take only three SCVSP classes each year), letting her keep pace with her classmates and graduate on time. This student began college in fall 2010.14

Encompassing the greater Richmond, Virginia, area, the Henrico County Public Schools use Blackboard Collaborate to teach CPR. According to Michael S. Czekajlo, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor Anesthesiology, Division of Critical Care, Director of Simulation, Anesthesiology and Critical Care at Virginia Commonwealth University Health System, students throughout the county receive a CPR Anytime kit that includes an inflatable CPR mannequin, a DVD for CPR instruction and skills rehearsal, and a family-and-friends CPR booklet. The school district then creates a virtual room with Blackboard Collaborate in which students (and family members) at home login to join a physician or Henrico CPR instructor. Students interact live online with the instructors and practice their CPR skills with the CPR Anytime kit mannequin while being checked off for accuracy by the online physician. This method allows for repeated skills performance, corrections, and feedback about effective CPR delivery on the mannequin. A pre-test of CPR knowledge is administered to students, as well as a post-skills test. In 2010, more than 100 students and families became certified in “iCare CPR!”

Improving Student Outcomes with Blackboard Collaborate

Better grades. Increased course completion rates. Fewer failures. Lives bettered, and sometimes even saved. The results are in. With the interactive, synchronous learning capabilities offered through the Blackboard Collaborate platform, schools of all shapes and sizes are improving student outcomes.

To learn more about how you can reach your academic, administrative, and financial goals through more interactive and cost-effective collaboration, visit blackboardcollaborate.com, contact us at collaboratesales@blackboard.com, or try our solution free for 30 days at bbcollaborate.com/try.
