facilitating group work using Collaborate Ultra and Office365

Collaborate Ultra is Blackboard's webinar technology which enables virtual attendance and participation in teaching sessions. To facilitate a seminar or tutorial online with active engagement, tools include a whiteboard which participants can annotate, smaller breakout groups, a chat message box, microphones and video, hand-raising, screen-sharing and polling. While breakout groups enable smaller group discussions, they lack an in-built ability to collaborate on a specific document or whiteboard that can then be shared again with the main group. We therefore explored the capabilities of Office 365 to support this additional layer of capability.

approach

Collaborate Ultra was used to support work in small groups (five groups of 10 students) for revision tasks in preparation for an upcoming exam. The purpose was to reinforce key learning points from two previous online revision lectures and surface any misunderstandings for further discussion and guidance, and to have the groups small enough to support a high level of participation. The first revision lecture consisted of a summary of the key theories and how to apply theories to analyse corporate governance problems or potential solutions by drawing on a) theoretical arguments and b) empirical evidence. The second one focused on exam structure and additionally included specific guidance on the switch to online exams in response to coronavirus contingency planning.

The module leader created multiple Office 365 PowerPoint assets in their personal OneDrive with a document for each group, enabled it to allow editing and then shared the individual link into the specific group chats within the Collaborate Ultra interface. The idea was to get students to practice answering mock exam questions in an analytical way for reinforcement purposes, as was done repeatedly in seminars and throughout the term. Students were already familiar with the idea of 10-15 minute small group discussions, usually each group would then present a short poster and as a class would discuss the similarities, differences, good ideas, problems, and then the module leader would often provide a sketch outline of the potential answer.
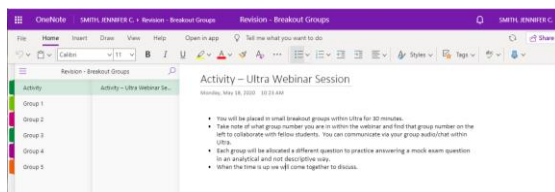
Creating a multiple online assets (PowerPoint) for each group allowed each group of students to access via the link and work in the same style as they were used to within face-to-face teaching. Having the ability to capture the collaboration in this way enabled the module leader to bring it on screen in the main room during the plenary and use the students' work as a basis to develop an outline answer. It also meant the resource was available after the session for students both to reference and reflect upon. Students could also copy it to make their own annotations to and/or develop.

outcomes

This activity was designed to allow students to work together in real time to promote engagement, give some reassurance and increase their

confidence. It surfaced some expected misunderstandings, for example around structuring of answers, which could be addressed. By supporting them to approach questions using a systematic theoretical analysis it was helped students to feel more comfortable and capable of writing a good answer.

One learning point was around the choice of Office 365 tools to capture group work. In practice, the module leader found creating multiple links, managing access to each asset was very time consuming and it also had the effect of limiting the time available to focus on each group's outputs. The solution going forward is to concentrate group efforts within one tool – One Note – which simplifies the process by creating one access point and organising each group's activities via each tab.

further resources

[EDU blog post - Sharing an Office 365 asset](#)

[Microsoft - Sharing from One Drive](#)

[Blackboard Breakout groups](#)

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tell us about your experience

If you've used collaborative group work online or have other examples of how you've developed online learning activities, we'd love to hear from you – please get in touch with [a member of the Educational Development Unit](#).

acknowledgements