

Virtual collaboration using Blackboard Collaborate

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Introduction

Opportunities for students to engage in active learning can significantly enhance the effectiveness of their learning experience. The use of virtual classrooms can provide learning environments which are active, collaborative and engaging for students where the tutor and other students are not co-located. There is a wide range of software tools to support virtual classrooms; the focus of this session is on Blackboard Collaborate, however many of the principles and guidance will be relevant to other virtual classroom software tools.

Blackboard Collaborate Ultra is a web conferencing tool that allows students and staff to synchronously communicate online anywhere in the world where there is an appropriate internet connection.

This session explores BB Collaborate and the application of a flipped classroom approach to enhance levels of student engagement and activity within virtual classrooms.

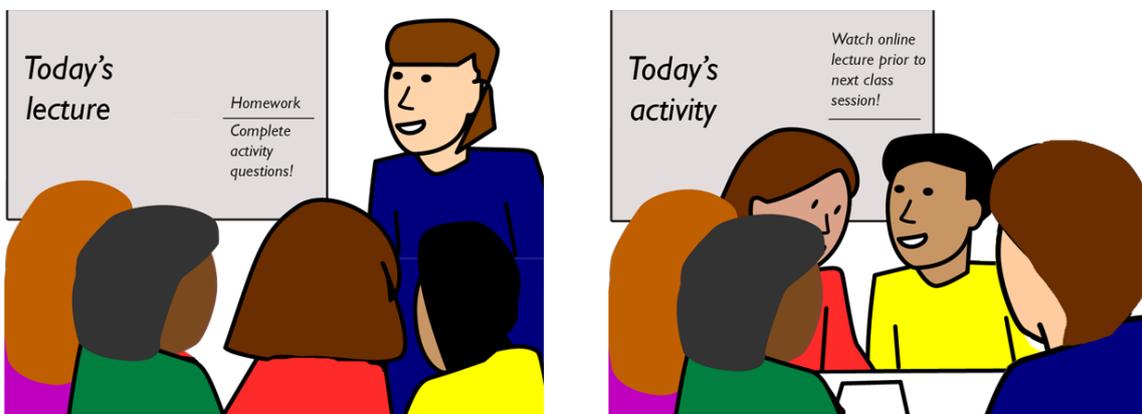
The session will focus on the use of Blackboard Collaborate for virtual tutorials and webinars.

Tutorial or webinar

There are two main ways which BB Collaborate can be used in a virtual classroom setting:

Tutorial

BB Collaborate can be used as a **virtual room** for a tutorial, to support student learning in a '[flipped classroom](#)' model. The tutorial can be structured to provide '[active learning](#)' with participation, group work in virtual 'break out' rooms and feedback from the students rather than passive transmission of information.



Traditional and flipped classrooms - UHI / public domain

In this model, the acquisition of new knowledge is undertaken at home prior to the tutorial. The students will have worked through reading, viewed media and completed any set work or activities. This frees up the tutorial time for participation in activities and group work within the Collaborate space. This is intended to facilitate the students' understanding of prior learning, rectify any gaps in knowledge or understanding and reinforce important concepts.

How you structure the session will depend to a certain extent on how large your tutorial group is, as Collaborate only supports a limited number (approximately 6 depending on bandwidth) of simultaneously active video and audio channels. If it is a small tutorial group (around 10 people or less) then you may structure the session slightly differently, than if you have a large tutorial group of 10-15. It is very difficult to create and moderate a highly collaborative environment with tutorial groups of more than 15-20 people and you may have to limit your audience participation to polling and chat only.

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Webinar

When using Collaborate as a webinar tool, the focus is on the presenter delivering a presentation to the Collaborate room. The presenter may be the moderator or if a guest presenter, another tutor may be the moderator. If the number of participants is high, you may need assistance.

The presenter may use the electronic whiteboard to write on and use file sharing or desktop sharing to show PowerPoint presentations and images. The sharing of video within a Collaborate session should be used with caution as it places high demands on bandwidth. The presenter may use the same interactive tools (polling, messaging) as in the tutorial mode to involve the audience and get feedback, but the difference is that the main emphasis is on *transmission* of information to the audience and the format is considered a low collaborative environment. Therefore, the pedagogical approach in structuring the session differs from the tutorial model where the main emphasis is *participation* by the students within the Collaborate room.

Other Collaborate uses

The BB Collaborate space can be used to provide one-on-one support to students or to provide students with access to an online collaborative environment for ad-hoc communication, self-support and tutor support office hours as well [other uses](#).

Planning for a flipped classroom

Use Blooms Taxonomy to help support you in the planning of activities that match the correct level of higher order thinking skills. The [Blooms Taxonomy](#) learning resource in the [Staff Support Portal](#) has examples of activities and outputs at the various levels of the cognitive domain.

The Flipped Classroom is really about completing much of the lower levels of Blooms, such as knowledge and comprehension, at home and demonstrating the understanding of the more complex higher order skills of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation in a physical or virtual classroom environment where targeted support can be given.

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Home learning content

The home learning content consists of the material that you would deliver in class in a face to face or VC lecture. The lecture may have been placed into a video format by either filming a lecture, recording a lecture through a desktop facility such as [Camtasia Relay](#) or by converting a PowerPoint presentation with audio voiceover into a video with [Office Mix](#).

However it is not essential that the home learning content is presented in video format. It may also consist of recommended readings, activities, workbooks, reports or case studies. The important factor is that whatever the format of the learning material, the required knowledge is available to the student and addresses the learning outcomes of the module/unit descriptor.

Class activities

The class activities in a flipped classroom model are used to deepen or clarify understanding of the core learning material through discussion with peers and activities facilitated by tutors.

The production of class activities does not require a large quantity of 'writing time' but rather 'thinking time', in order to devise meaningful and good quality resources. Planning the classroom activities for a Flipped Classroom model may take more time than for the traditional 'chalk and talk' but this results in quality learning by the students through 'doing' rather than 'sitting and listening'. Using an iterative process, activities are revised and improved continually with the input of students and peers.

Planning for a Collaborate tutorial

“Student responses infer that online classrooms should build on course content from the perspective of application which may also include applying concepts related to completion of assessment tasks. Students would prefer to see value in attending the session i.e. apply the knowledge learnt together as a cohort (discuss, engage etc.) rather than revise or rehash content” (Bodey, K., Ravaga, V. & Sloan, S., 2016, p54).

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Therefore the benefit to students is in using the Collaborate tutorial for activities that apply and extend the knowledge gained by working through the set learning resources at home rather than only using the tutorial to revisit the content. The inclusion of activities and group work are the key to running a 'best practice' Collaborate tutorial.

Considerations when planning for your tutorial

- Ensure the tutorial has a focused topic.
- Plan activities that are simple, short, focused, and learner centric.
- Plan an opening icebreaker- it could be personal introductions or a more structured exercise. Plan the icebreaker to make sure that students are comfortable with the Collaborate features and understand the etiquette. As the weeks progress the icebreaker can shift from a more introductory/'getting sorted out' emphasis to something more substantial - perhaps a recap or quiz question that relates to information from the previous week's Collaborate session.
- Plan activities that assess student understanding of the content studied at home, particularly activities that extend and reinforce what they were set to learn that week. You could also plan activities towards the end of the module that are useful for revision purposes, for the whole or part of the unit or module. Plan activities that allow peer-to-peer and student-to-lecturer sharing and encourage comments and discussion.
- With a little creativity and thinking time, you can convert almost all your classroom exercises to an online format. For example, groups can work on the Collaborate whiteboard while they discuss a problem in a similar way that they would use a whiteboard in the classroom to complete a collaborative exercise.
- Avoid slipping into the broadcast mode of delivery where you are 'delivering a lecture' rather than allowing the students to participate in active learning.
- Plan in prompts for discussions and use these to introduce new topics, encourage feedback and bring 'off-topic discussions' back 'on-topic'. However, this is a balancing act; try not to over 'manage' the student discussion with too many prompts and interrupts but still keep students focused on the topic.

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- Plan so that you do not have situations where you ask (particularly in a quiet class) an open-ended question and receive complete silence from the class! This is where the polling tool is useful as it forces the tutor to frame questions with succinct answers so, for example, if a tutor is not getting much discussion or feedback from an open discussion question, they could re-frame it and insert a poll into the session to start drawing out the students and getting them to participate.

At the start of class where the open-ended question is asked “Has everyone read the week 1 home learning content?” and there is silence, change the question to an instruction and give it at the previous class for example, “Read chapter 8 and I want each of you to tell me at the start of next class, what you felt was the most important factor in the case study.” Then at the start of the next lesson ask each person for their factor. This will soon sort out who has not read the material as well.

- Combine Collaborate sessions with other tools (e.g. email, wiki, discussion fora), to run shorter concluding live discussions, following lengthier asynchronous collaborative working.
- Experiment with break out rooms to split larger cohorts into smaller (more manageable) peer learning groups. This is the ideal setting for a micro teaching session for each group. This approach exemplifies the necessary ‘learner centric’ pedagogies crucial for effective use of Collaborate.
- If you are finding it hard to juggle the moderator role of taking care of all the practical button pushing, with the tutor role of directing and facilitating the activities, try experimenting with having a nominated student to assist with the moderating task. If trying this approach, practice at least once before any sessions.
- Accept that some things are not going to work or work every time so discuss with your students and peers why something may not have worked and how you can improve it.
- Design your session with some sort of student activity every 5-10 minutes. In a tutorial session of one hour for example, this may mean planning around 6 activities or so, depending on their length. If you do have to present material, try not to present more

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than 10 to 15 minutes of content at one time without some sort of interaction, sharing of experiences, or group activity.

For example; a rough lesson plan may be:

- The tutor starts with an introduction to the week's topic, updates the class on where they are in the module schedule and any other necessary course information and goes over the etiquette rules. An icebreaker activity could go in here too (5 -10 minutes).
- The tutor draws something on the whiteboard or shows an image relating to the learning content the students have worked through at home and poses a question. This may also be an item that students indicated that they had difficulty with. The students discuss the item and the question (10 minutes).
- The tutor does a poll with a question relating to the whiteboard diagram or image and the discussion (5 minutes).
- Students are given another question or problem and go to Collaborate breakout rooms to discuss then each group comes back with an answer (15 minutes).
- The class discuss the answers they fed back, with the tutor giving prompts and keeping the discussion 'on track' (10 minutes).
- The tutor explains how this question relates to the learning outcome and the upcoming assignment (10 minutes).
- The tutor allots time to answer student questions about the activities or the content (5-10 minutes).

Use an end of tutorial exercise to find out how your students are progressing such as the pyramid:

1 thing I am still unsure about

2 things I learned today

3 things I knew already.



Challenges

Think about the teaching challenges you might face and work out some strategies to address them.

For example:

Planning for the students who have not done the reading or coursework at home.

Learning challenge	Teaching strategy	Technology feature
Students are not prepared for class.	Use more frequent quizzes on the readings.	Use the online assessment feature in Blackboard.

Blackboard Collaborate may only support up to six simultaneous, open web cam and audio feeds at any one time. Where students are unable to use the video because of bandwidth or other issues, thinking of strategies to keep them engaged with only the audio feed is even more important, particularly as you will have no visual clues if they become disengaged.

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Alternate plan or 'Plan B'

Technology does not always perform as expected and there may be sessions where the technology fails. Plan for these times! The tutorial does not need to be a write-off if you have a good tutorial lesson outline and a plan of what steps to take if you are cut off.

Consider the possibility of using phone conferencing, Skype, or discussion board to cover all or part of the intended tutorial work and activities.

At the start of the session, when covering the outline content and objectives, mention what to do if Collaborate cuts off and what the alternative plan is.

A quick 'Plan B' might consist of a couple of readings or a video clip to watch with an activity to complete, for example. The information could be just a few lines on a word document that is then emailed to the students, or the document could be placed in the BB module space to be downloaded. This extra material can be activated at the time of the incident or sent pre-emptively.

The alternate plan should be meaningful. For example rather than say 'revise last week's work', use a more specific approach directing them to revision questions and activities with formative outputs. This could be written work or online such as on a discussion board, wiki or blog.

Note: Be aware that any difficulties with Collaborate may not be a problem with the BB software but could be a system problem with your College or UHI systems so it is always best to ring Helpdesk (150) if there are any difficulties.

Use of 'breakout' rooms

Collaborate breakout rooms:

- provide private virtual rooms for group work;
- enable tutors to have quick, private problem-solving sessions.

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The features of the breakout rooms enable you to:

- have private audio, whiteboard, application sharing discussions;
- move 'content' from room to room;
- pre load content in the rooms.

Students will need to have *Moderator* access to be able to upload PowerPoints and record sessions.

Examples of ways you might use breakout rooms for group work

- Collaboratively create/edit documents - groups can use application sharing when they use their Collaborate room or in breakout rooms.
- Collaboratively work on problems through discussion – present group work to the whole class.
- Groups can make a recording of a session where they present on a topic, or create a PowerPoint to present to the whole group during a Collaborate session.

Practical tips

- Use the timer: once people are in a breakout room, they cannot hear what is happening in the main room so it is helpful to set the timer for breakout rooms so that participants know when they need to return to the main room. The timer is in the *Tools* menu.
- Set clear expectations: make sure the students know what is expected of them whilst in the Breakout room.
- Moderators can copy all or selected Whiteboard pages from breakout rooms to the main room (participants cannot perform this function).
- Including students as nominated leaders in break out rooms is a good way to help maintain focus and also provides greater incentive for the student(s) to help them take initiative and control in the learning process.

Online guides

[Blackboard Collaborate Moderator's Guide: Breakout rooms](#)

[Blackboard Strategies: Using Blackboard Pedagogically \(PPT\)](#)

Before the session starts

It is useful to have a planning sheet so that you can tick off the tasks that need to be completed before a Collaborate tutorial.

Download a [suggested timeline](#) sheet.

Planning pre-session student support

- Check that each student has the correct technology to participate in the Collaborate session. If there is any doubt that the student's own devices are suitable, get the student to check with UHI Helpdesk before the session starts!
- Students should ensure that they have the correct extension and add-ins installed and keep the operating system up to date with any updates or patches if they are using their home computers.
- For sound, ideally, a headset (headphones with microphone) plugged into the audio port is best rather than the computer or laptop's internal audio pick up (which would allow background noise to be heard).
- A webcam, either separate or integral to a laptop, is recommended. If no webcam is available, a student can join with only audio input. Students can also join the Collaborate session by [phone](#) if necessary but should be aware that mobile device users cannot use a teleconference for audio communications in a session at this time.
- Support students with using the technology - both prior to the session and with activities that teach them how to use Collaborate.

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- Make sure they have information about 'Attending a Collaborate Tutorial' including Joining instructions, etiquette and what the session will be covering. You might also add instructions on what to do if the tutor drops out or the student drops out.

Tips for preparing for a good tutorial

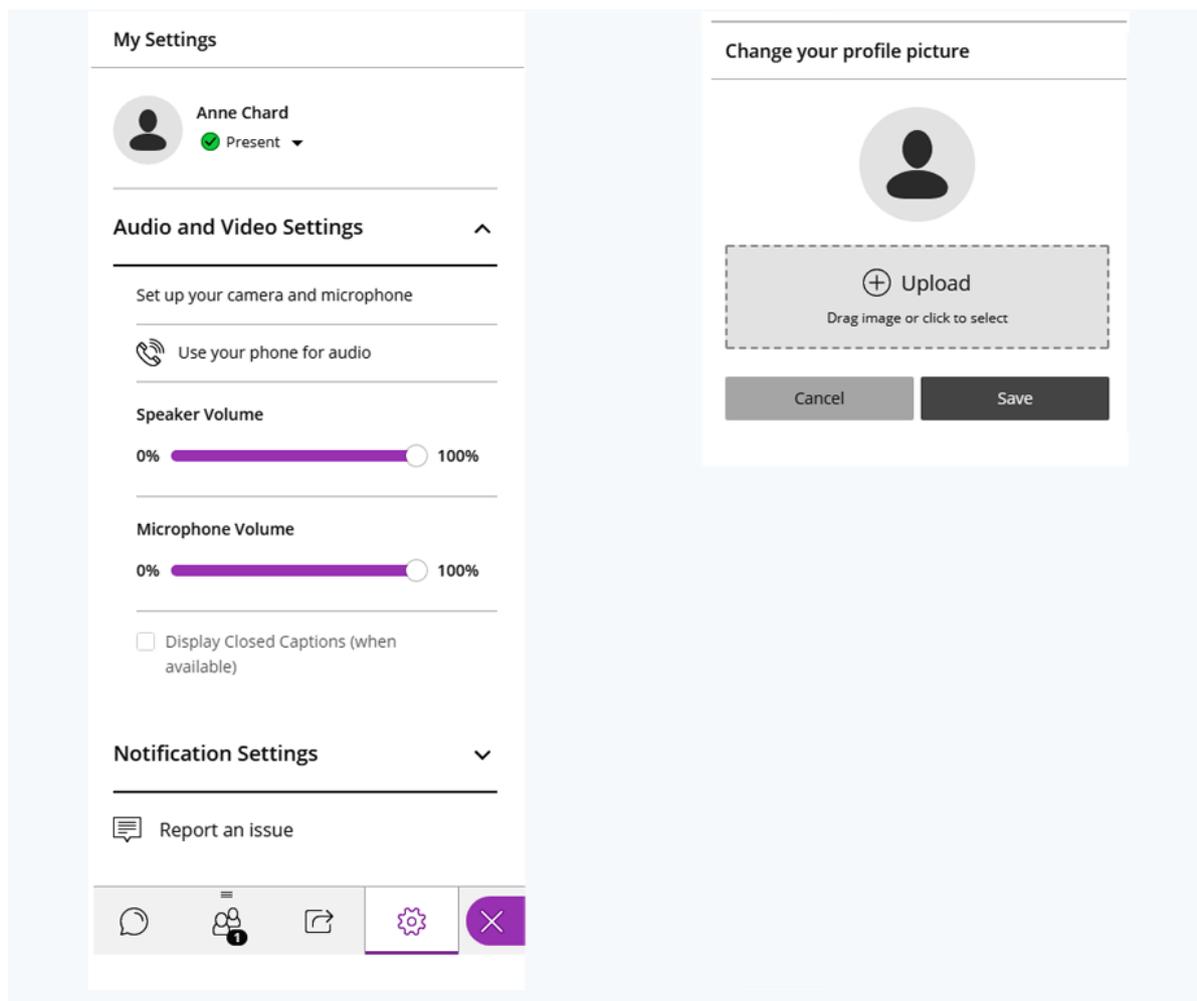
If using voice or video (to present or ask questions), a high quality headphone/microphone headset is recommended to eliminate feedback through PC speakers, and remove background noise.

Plan the session thoroughly - this does not mean that you have to plan every minute or detail but at least have a framework to work within and a bank of pre-prepared activities and interactive material that you can use with the students. Session moderators will need to become comfortable with multi-tasking in a live online environment.

Practice with BB Collaborate at least a couple of times so that you know where all the tools are and how to use them. Ideally, if it is your first time running a session as moderator, try to do a rehearsal. This will also give you a chance to confirm timings so that you can estimate more accurately how long each activity or segment of your tutorial will take.

If not using the video feature, provide a photo of yourself in the icon space; this adds a personal touch and provides the students with something more than a blank icon to look at, enabling them to envisage you as you speak. To upload a photo of yourself, click on the 'My Settings' button on the right then click on the icon at the top next to your name and insert image.

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Set up the teaching environment prior to delivery by turning off devices, closing unnecessary applications, diverting phones and putting up 'do not disturb signs'. It is important that applications such as Jabber and Skype are not open at the same time as they may interfere with Collaborate.

It is recommended that during lessons you close all unnecessary applications and stop any downloads. If you are on your own computer at home, turn off automatic updates and virus scans scheduled for the same time as the session, as all of these can interfere with the lessons. This information should also be on the 'Attending a Collaborate session' information that is given to students.

The majority of problems occur at the student end, usually with the audio not being picked up by (some) participants. Ensure all participants check their systems well before sessions to receive/transmit both audio and video.

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Join the session early, check audio, participant privileges and load any necessary content.

Have any web links you will be using ready in a file so you can cut and paste them into Collaborate. In the Sharing Tab, items in many file formats such as PowerPoint presentations can be preloaded into the session. You can also load content once the session is open. Resource-intensive applications like Prezi will be very slow to run.

More examples of best practice

[Top Ten Habits of Highly Effective Blackboard Collaborate™ Moderators](#) (PDF)

Delivering the session

Check all students have the joining information (the rules and etiquette should be part of this or a separate sheet) and clearly explain the content and objectives of session.

[Netiquette](#) (docx)

Make sure the session is recorded and that the recording of the session commences at the correct time. Studies have shown that recorded sessions are an important tool for the students who may use the recorded sessions in a variety of ways, for example to catch up if they missed the session, for revision or for reviewing to go over something they might not have understood.

If a student is having problems, one good idea if possible, is to log into the session from two accounts, one as moderator and one as participant, so you can see what students are seeing and troubleshoot issues that arise. Use a laptop or second computer for your 'student' login."

Ensure that you have the contact numbers ready in case you need to call for technical assistance.

Outline your session with an overview.

Introduce sessions with an icebreaker activity and use the time to make sure students are comfortable with the Collaborate features and understand the etiquette.

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Keep activities simple, short, focused, and learner centric. Prompt frequent discussion. Blackboard Collaborate sessions should be of reasonable duration, not exceeding 60 minutes.

Energy and enthusiasm is more important with Collaborate than at a face to face presentation so there should be no reduction in the quality of the session if the students have to turn off their video to improve reception. Even if the connection is slow and you have to turn of the video, use your web cam at the start and at the end as this helps maintain a good rapport with the students.

Decide if and when to schedule any breaks.

Know what your plan is if a student drops out or you drop out of Collaborate.

Have a 'Plan B' ready to put in place if the session is unable to continue.

At the end of the session, take a screen grab of the Collaborate chat to reflect upon. This might also be a useful resource; for example, to use the points raised in the discussion board or as the basis for a further activity.

Features of Blackboard Collaborate

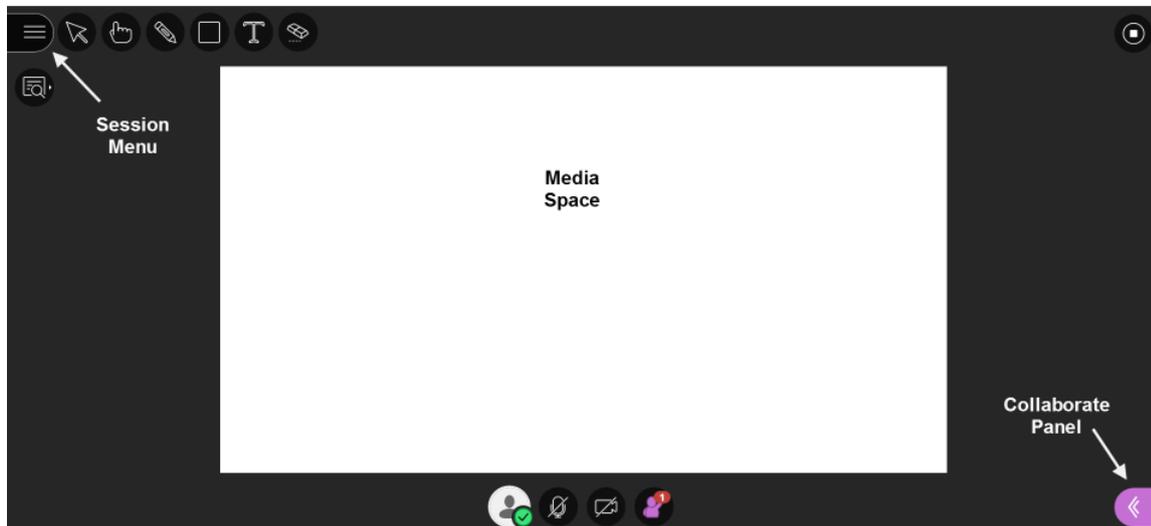
Every UHI module has a Collaborate room and you will need to [add it to your course menu](#). There is no need to book in advance just add the link to the module menu. The Collaborate room is permanently available 24/7 in every module. It is up to you as lecturers how you schedule access.

Blackboard Collaborate comprises three distinct areas: a media space, the session menu, and a Collaborate panel.

- The **media space** is where the content of the session is displayed.
- The **session menu** opens a collection of high level session actions and information. Open it using the session menu button at the top left of the screen.

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- The **Collaborate panel** is a single space to go to engage other participants with all the collaborate tools, such as 'file sharing' and 'polling'. Open this panel by clicking on the Collaborate Panel icon.



The Collaborate interface

For tutors:

The tutors will see the same basic features as the students but in addition, Collaborate 'Moderators' will have extra features.

The session menu

The session menu opens a collection of high level session actions and information. Open it using the Session menu button at the top left of the screen. Tools and features you use only once or twice during a session are conveniently grouped here:

- Find details about the session.
- [Record your sessions.](#)
- [Connect your phone for audio.](#)
- Get help or report an issue.
- Take tutorials that show you how to use Collaborate.

	Start recording	Start/stop recording
	Use your phone for audio	Use your phone for audio during a session
	Report an issue	Report an issue with the session
	Blackboard Collaborate Help	Go to Blackboard Collaborate help on help.blackboard.com
	Tell me about Collaborate	Open the new user interface tour
	Leave session	Exit the session
		Close the session menu

The Collaborate panel

The Collaborate panel takes your session experience to the next level. You now have a single space to go to engage other participants with all the great collaborate tools.

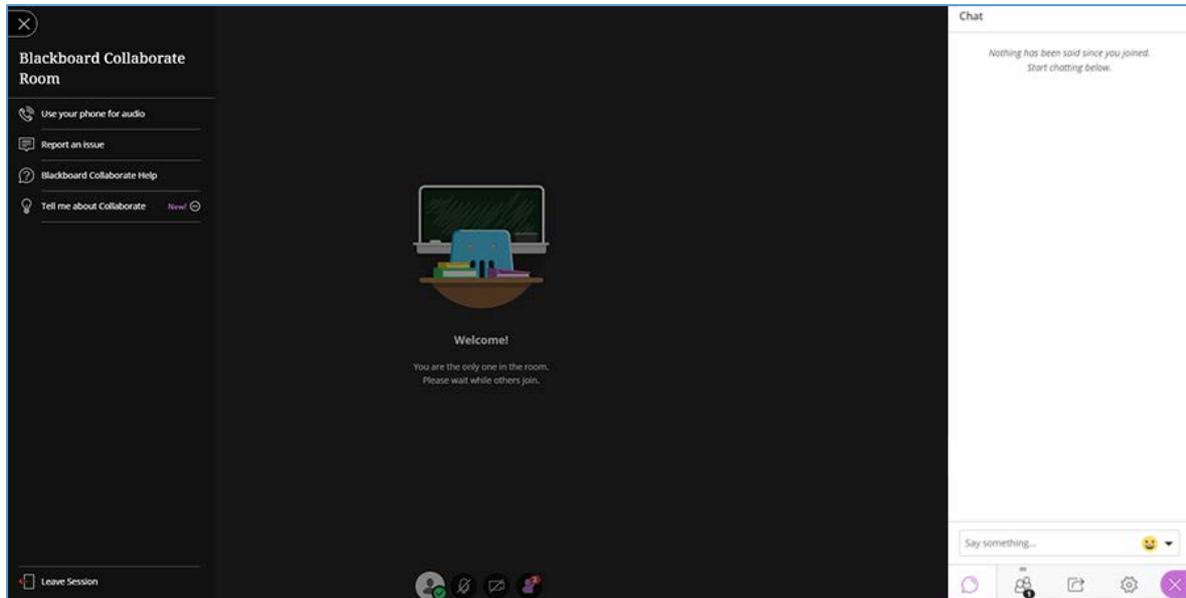
- [Chat with everyone](#) in the session or privately with other moderators.
- Manage participants.
- [Share content](#), [start polling](#) or [breakout groups](#).
- Set your personal and session settings.

	Text chat with participants.
	Participants panel - view network connection and control permissions for participants.
	Share content - files, whiteboard and screens - with participants.
	Share content - files, whiteboard and screens - with participants.
	Close the collaborate panel.

In the Collaborate Participants Instant messaging side panel, moderators have control over the permission settings so that conversations can be public or anonymous.

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For students:



The student interface

This is the student interface with the session menu and the Collaborate panel open. The students do not have access to the moderator tools.

An instant messaging panel at the right hand side of the screen allows the students to reply to questions or comment on anything in the tutorial. It is also handy for taking a rollcall at the start of the session.

	<p>The hand raise icon: students press this if they wish to speak. This is so that students are not talking over each other. The use of this icon is one of the items that should be covered in the introduction to the students at the beginning of the session when you discuss 'Etiquette'.</p>
	<p>The video icon: this turns the video off and on. Ideally, in a tutorial situation this icon would be turned on so that you could see your students and the students could see you but this will depend on the size of the class and the bandwidth available. If there are problems with a poor bandwidth and a person's image is pixelating, then it is better for them to turn off the video and</p>

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	keep to audio only. It is likely that if tutorials are more than 6-10 people, the bandwidth might be affected if they all have the video on.
	The sound icon: this can be turned off and on. Remind the students to keep the sound off unless they are speaking.

Further reading

- Phil Green gives practical advice in this article: [How to create a live online learning event](#)
- [Blackboard Collaborate Moderators Guide](#)

References

Bodey, K., Ravaga, V. & Sloan, S. (2016) 'Preliminary exploration of student behavioural outcomes using Blackboard Collaborate in fully online courses'. In S. Barker, S. Dawson, A. Pardo, & C. Colvin (Eds.), *Show Me The Learning. Proceedings ASCILITE 2016 Adelaide* [online]. Available from <http://2016conference.ascilite.org/wp-content/uploads/ascilite2016_bodey_full.pdf> [12 July 2017]