

GROUP PROJECT #1 REPORT INFORMATION

Using Blackboard Communication Tools

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Findings](#)

[Blackboard Collaborate](#)

[Voice Email](#)

[Voice Board](#)

[Voice Podcaster](#)

[Blackboard IM \(Wimba Pronto\)](#)

[Summary](#)

[References](#)

[Blackboard Collaborate:](#)

[Voice Email:](#)

[Voice Board:](#)

[Voice Podcaster:](#)

[Blackboard IM:](#)

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Introduction

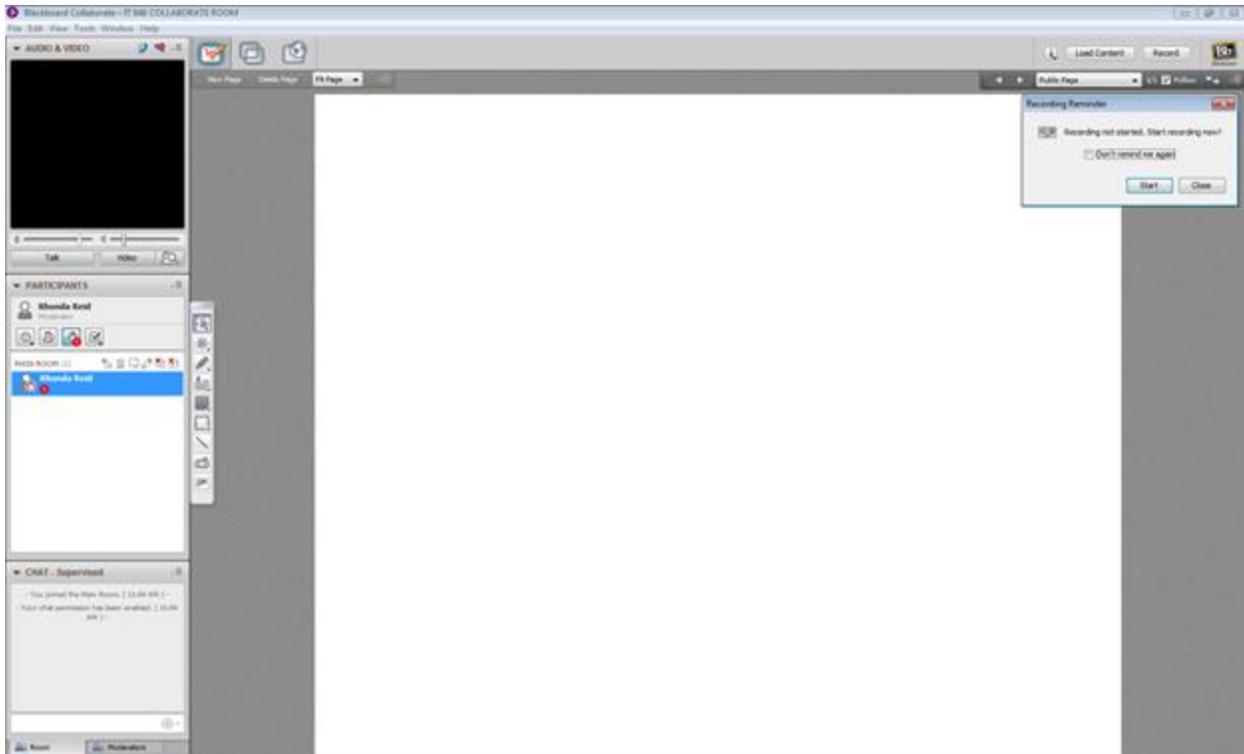
Members of IT648 Group #3 met via Blackboard Collaborate IM Group Chat to explore the five tools assigned in this project: Blackboard Collaborate, Blackboard Voice Email, Blackboard Voice Board, Blackboard Voice Podcaster, and Blackboard IM (formerly Wimba Pronto). Group members discussed the steps necessary to reach the Group Chat window, problems encountered in signing into Blackboard IM, and shared suggestions for overcoming some of the issues.

Each group member contributed his or her viewpoint as to the functions, advantages, challenges, and integration opportunities of each Blackboard tool. Members agreed that Blackboard could be an asset to the classroom teacher, while stipulating that cost, student access to appropriate technology, and student age could be disadvantages to the full utilization of the program. This report discusses the group's findings regarding the functions, advantages, challenges with possible solutions, and potential classroom integration strategies for each of the following Blackboard tools: Blackboard Collaborate, Voice Email, Voice Board, Voice Podcaster, and Blackboard IM (Wimba Pronto).

Findings

Blackboard Collaborate

Functions. Blackboard Collaborate is a web based virtual classroom solution within the blackboard environment. The function of Blackboard Collaborate is to create a live web conference, where students and instructors can virtually gather for online classes. The features of the program are live video and audio, screen sharing, annotation capabilities, file sharing, and instant messaging. Within the interactive environment participants can discuss subject matter similarly to that of a face to face classroom. When first entering a Blackboard Collaborate session room, the screen appears as shown below:



Advantages. The primary advantages of using Blackboard Collaborate are the vast features in which it hosts. Students can visually see and hear an instructor in real time and communicate with them as they would in a face to face classroom. The program layout allows for the student to both see the facial expressions of the instructor and view his or her screen for an image such as a PowerPoint. This feature allows for many of the benefits of the face to face environment within an online format.

The features such as the chat session in the lower left hand corner of the screen allow for students to discreetly ask questions and or comment on the topics being discussed. This allows students who many not have a microphone to participant in the discussion. This lower bandwidth feature of the program can have many advantages for students who may not be able to send a voice or video feed.

Other beneficial features of the software are the ability for the host or instructor to moderate discussion. The software allows the host to control what is occurring in the room. For example if a student's microphone is producing a lot of feedback, the instructor has the ability to mute their feed.

Challenges and Solutions. Problematic areas of using Blackboard Collaborate are that it requires adequate bandwidth in order to be used. While the majority of students may have access to high bandwidth communication lines, any students with slower access will have difficulty participating in the classroom session. Other technical issues when using this software are that it

runs on a Java based platform and will require the student to have a certain version of Java in order to run properly. It is commonly seen that students complain of the inability to connect due to java and other browser errors. A fair level of computer knowledge is required in order to participate within the session; therefore many students could be at a disadvantage when using the medium.

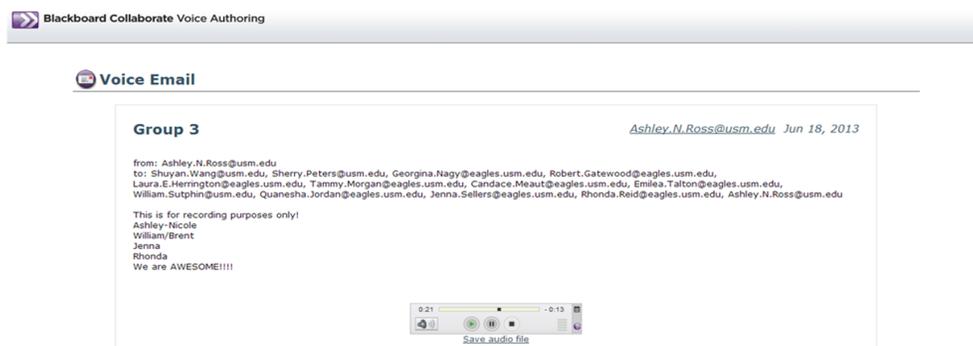
Other issues that may arise are the actual hardware requirements. A microphone and webcam are required to fully use all of the features of the program. Students may have difficulty in getting these hardware items to work on their computers, or may not have access to the hardware at all.

Further issues that were noticed when using the program are that the screen share function occasionally cuts out and loads poorly. Content may not be fully shown on the screen or not shown at all. This is a major drawback to using the program. While most internet connections such as broadband or DSL have a significant amount of bandwidth for downloading, the upload speed can be fairly limited and make sending data to the servers slow. Slow speeds within a live environment take away much of the immersive experience that is required for successful integration of these tools.

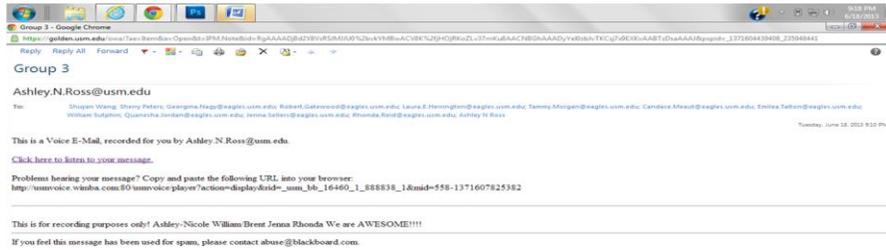
Integration Strategies. Strategies for integrating this tool into a curriculum are primarily dependent on the content to be instructed. Although Blackboard Collaborate is a powerful enough program to host almost any content that is capable of being broadcast over video conferencing. The screen share and annotation feature would allow an instructor to do many of the same activities that are done on a document camera, pc, or whiteboard in the classroom.

Voice Email

Functions. The Voice Email tool found within the Blackboard Collaborate software allows participants to send and listen to audio email messages. The voice email composition screen is shown below:



Here you see an example of a received email containing an audio component:



Advantages. Blackboard's Voice Email tool has advantages to the classroom teacher. The Voice Email tool has a subject line and a text box to enter in text along with the audible output, allowing the recipient to read the message as well as hear it. Student engagement and message comprehension may be higher when the student is allowed to listen to a message rather than just read it. The teacher can set the "From" email address and disallow students' changing or editing the address which gives the teacher more control over the security of the email; the teacher can use the same permissions settings to control who receives the voice email. While the students may find it frustrating to be unable to specify to whom the email is sent, the security benefit cannot be ignored. This tool gives you a confirmation box saying that the email was sent. Students can download the audio file if desirable.

Challenges and Solutions. Like all software, the Blackboard Voice Email tool is not "one size fits all." When first pulling up the voice email tool using the Google Chrome browser, the following error message appeared: "Applet should be there, but the Wimba Voice server is down". Users may be required to enable pop-ups or load unauthenticated script depending upon the browser being used and the settings in place on the user's computer, which could present a significant difficulty if the user does not have the necessary knowledge and does not have access to someone who can make the necessary changes. In addition, if the user's computer is on a network, the technology department may have to be called to bypass the system to allow the use of the software.

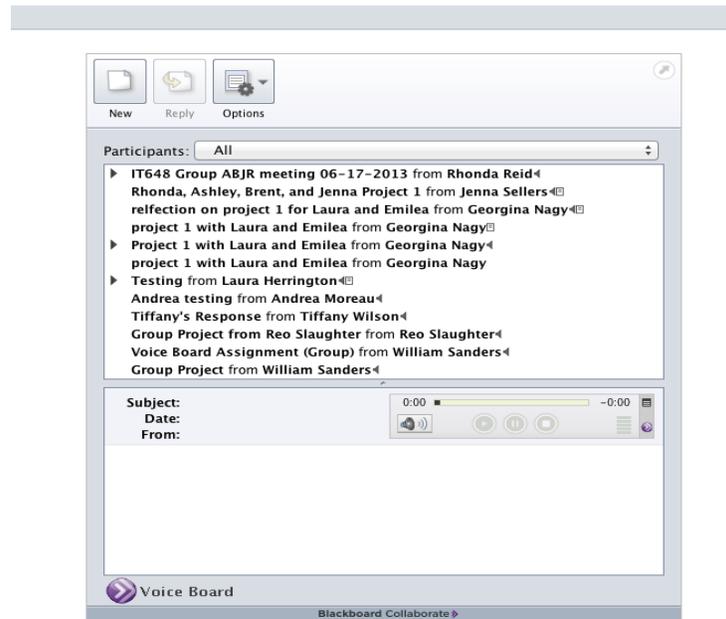
Sometimes challenges increase in proportion to security measures being implemented: Should the teacher disable student permissions for editing of the "To" and/or "From" sections, the student cannot select just one or a group of students to receive the voice email; the email will be delivered to every email address specified by the teacher; the result of such settings would have every voice email going to every person in a class even though the email is meant only for certain students in a particular group. A simple method for dealing with the confusion, if not the volume of emails, would be for the teacher to have the students begin the subject line of every

email with the group identifier; such a method would enable recipients to quickly locate only those emails relevant to their group.

Integration Strategies. The Voice Email function may be used to emphasize and discuss the upcoming assignments and talk about the most important ideas rather than typing and emailing. The writer/presenter should make sure that his/her emphasis or voice tone is different when pointing out an important detail. Voice email may also be used as a one-to-one communication tool for providing feedback from the teacher to students regarding assignments if this tool will allow this function.

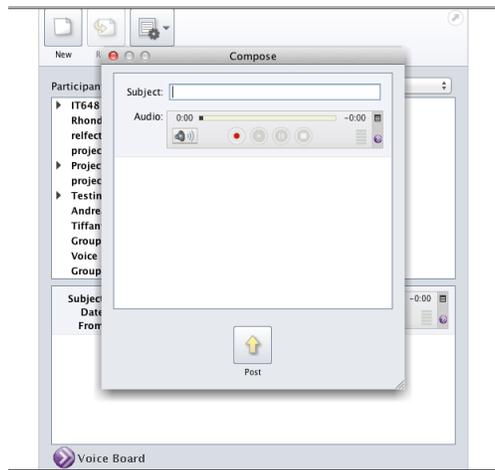
Voice Board

Functions. The function of the Blackboard Collaborate Voice Board tool is to allow users a method of asynchronous communication. Voice Board is essentially a discussion board which allows students to leave threads of audio-recorded voice messages in a discussion board format. The image shown below is an example of what Voice Board looks like from a student's perspective. When students want to record a new post, they click the "New" button at the top of the frame.



From there, a new window pops up which is where users create their posts. To do so, first, students must title their post by entering text into the box near "Subject". To begin recording, students and instructors must click the red record button next to "Audio". From here, users have a five minute time limit to record a post. There is also a feature at the bottom of this window that allows users to add text to their posts. This can be used to organize one's thoughts

beforehand, or to add to the post. When users are finished recording, they may replay their post before posting it to the discussion thread by hitting the play button in the same window. Once finished, users can post their recording by clicking “Post” at the bottom of the screen.

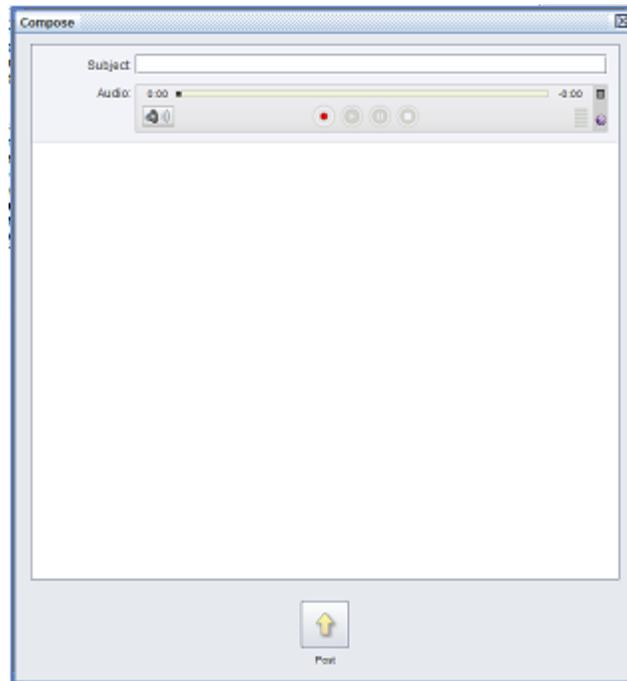


Back at the main board, students may click on the “Options” button at the top next to “New” and “Reply”. Under “Options”, students may select “play” to play one post or “continuous play”, which would play the entire thread.

Advantages. An advantage of using Voice Board is that students are able to participate in an oral discussion. This could be helpful in a classroom where limited time prevents all students from having the opportunity to respond to questions posed by their instructor. Voice Board allows students the opportunity to express their opinions and answers orally, just as if they were in the classroom. Voice Board’s five-minute limit per recording could be an advantage in encouraging students to organize their thoughts before they begin recording. Another advantage of using Voice Board is that students may type their response along with their voice recording. Voice Board may encourage students to participate in discussion who would otherwise be uncomfortable voicing their thoughts aloud in class. Voice Board may encourage students with limited typing skills to more easily and thoroughly discuss the topic.

Challenges and Solutions. There are several challenges with Voice Board, one being that if students or instructors wanted to record for a lengthy period of time, there is only a five-minute time limit to record a post. A student with more to discuss than the five minute limit allows would have to record multiple posts, which might discourage a fully in-depth discussion of ideas. A potential solution to this issue would be to have the students write out their thoughts and to practice until they have a concise script to follow and are able to complete the recording in under five minutes. Another challenge is that to use this tool, students must have a computer with access to a microphone and speakers. Another downfall of this tool is that students cannot download the recordings as an MP3, nor can they add media or websites to their posts.

User's Guide stipulates the additional options are available only to "Power User" and "Administrators". From the Voice Podcaster main screen, clicking the "New" icon provides access the Voice Podcaster Composition Window, which looks like this:



In the Compose window, the sender must key in a subject--or title--for the podcast, then click the red dot icon to begin recording; Blackboard's Voice Podcaster allows a maximum recording length of 20 minutes. Clicking the square dot icon stops the recording. Voice Podcaster also offers the option of keying text into the space below the audio controls: i.e., an abstract of the recording, an explanation of the purpose for the recording, or perhaps a full transcript for recipients to read as they listen. The User's Guide from the Blackboard site does not note any limits on number of characters in the description of the Text Field. When all recording and entering of text has been completed, clicking the Post icon located at the bottom center of the Compose window sends an email notification with a clickable link to all members of the group--for example, all members of the class with access to this Blackboard tool.

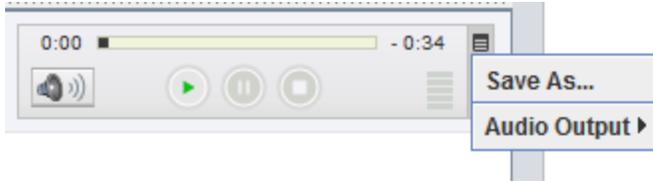
Advantages. If Blackboard is already available to the teacher, using this feature to create and post podcasts makes great good sense as limits may be set to restrict who receives notice of the podcast. Of course, once the podcast is saved to a device, the recipient could share it with anyone. Because podcasts can be saved as mp3 files, the teacher could send the file to a student via text message, via email, or the teacher could copy files and convert to a .wav file for cd distribution to students who may have cd player access but perhaps not internet access.

Challenges and Solutions. The most significant challenge to this software appears to be the cost. Voice Podcaster is available only as part of the Blackboard software, which must be purchased. One example of an alternative would be Audacity, which is a free, open source, cross-platform software for recording and editing audio (available at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>); files so created and edited may then be uploaded to a site such as YouTube or added to a blog.

As mentioned before, several steps were required to access the Voice Podcaster. An attempt to bookmark the screen led to the discovery that Blackboard had to be logged into on another screen for the saved link to work. Also, when using Google Chrome as the browser, a script authentication error occurred every time Voice Podcaster was loaded. While this issue could--and hopefully, would--be addressed by the technology support staff of a school with regard to the facility's computers, this or similar problems would create a frustrating challenge for students attempting to access the tool from home. A group member discovered how to correct this error only by accident: no pop up box appeared to point out how to correct the problem, instead a small, grey shield appeared in the address bar. Upon clicking on the shield icon, a link allowed the student to run the unauthenticated script, which enabled the Podcaster window to open.

The Blackboard Collaborate Voice User's Guide mentions "Edit" as a permission for only "Power Users" and this permission allows editing of all podcasts listed, no matter who recorded the podcast. The downloadable User's Guide does state that users with Instructor permission may import audio; a solution to the editing problem is that audio could be created and edited to perfection with an alternate program such as Audacity. In addition, the presenter could use a word processing program such as Word or Google Docs to create error-free script. The teacher could then import the audio file and paste the text prior to posting the podcast. For students without editing or importing permission, the most obvious solution is to re-record until the recording is acceptable to the presenter. An excellent method for reducing the number of times a speaker needs to record is to create a script beforehand--even keying or copying the script into the text box--and reading directly from the script. Practicing before recording would also assist in creating a better recording in fewer tries.

Integration Strategies. As a group project, students could research a topic, write a report, and create a podcast including the transcript of the report for others to read and listen to. A teacher could key or copy notes and handouts into the text box, then record the text for those students who are more auditory in their learning styles. Since a podcast may be saved to a device as an .mp3 file as shown in the following image,



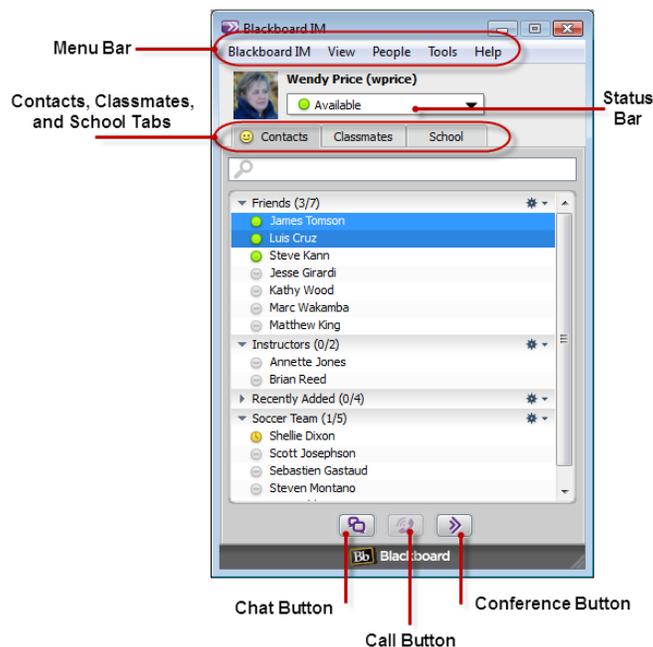
this tool could make a handy study aide for students to access outside of class and listen to via any device capable of playing .mp3 files.

Blackboard IM (Wimba Pronto)

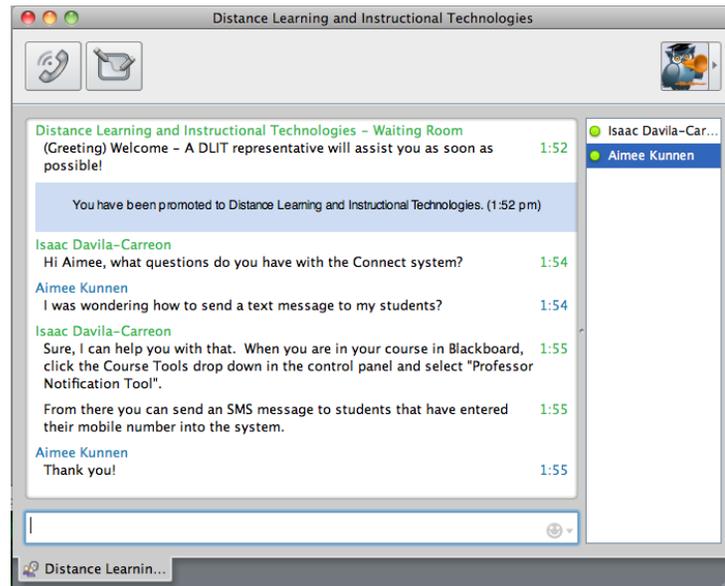
Functions. According to the Blackboard IM User's Guide at <http://library.blackboard.com/ref/be431ef8-1a8e-41f9-9c40-225fde30cc2e/index.htm> (also available as a downloadable pdf),

“Blackboard IM is an academic-centric instant collaboration solution designed to promote learning through group work and academic and administrative help. One of the main differences between Blackboard IM and other collaboration solutions is that Blackboard IM synchronizes with your institution's enrollment records. This means that students and teachers are automatically connected with other Blackboard IM users enrolled in the same courses. Blackboard IM also includes advanced features such as video chat, screen sharing, and a robust whiteboard, which allow everyone at your institution to collaborate and communicate quickly and easily.”

The illustration shown below of the Blackboard IM Interface is from the Blackboard IM User Guide pdf document:



As a simple quantitative comparison of functionality quantity--quality being a qualitative decision--the pdf download for the Blackboard Collaborate Voice User Guide is 64 pages and contains the instructions for the four separate Blackboard Voice tools: Voice Board, Voice Presentation, Voice Podcaster, and Voice Email; the pdf download for the Blackboard IM User Guide is 159 pages and contains the instructions for only the Blackboard IM tool.



Advantages. As listed in the User Guide, These are some of the most helpful features of Blackboard IM: “**Chat** to communicate quickly and efficiently with classmates; **Calls** for more natural communication with one-on-one or group conversations; **Collaboration** to share ideas with others; **Screen Sharing** for real-time display of any document or application on your computer; **Whiteboard** to harness the power of visual instruction; **Web Tour** to share web pages; **Web Conferencing** to use Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing for a full online classroom; **Office Hours** to create a focused setting where classmates and contacts can line up for individual attention; **Help Desks** for virtual assistance from the administrative services at your institution; **Broadcast Notifications** for institution-wide alerts.”

For group projects, this single tool might be enough for all collaboration activities taking place outside the classroom as students would have only to arrange a time to meet, rather than a place. IM is a synchronous tool which would be tremendously helpful when collaborating in live time as each individual participating could offer input and any adjustments needing made could happen immediately.

Challenges and Solutions. Student must be signed into Blackboard, then must download the Blackboard IM software; use of the tool from home could be problematic for students without necessary hardware, internet access, and/or parental permission. Blackboard IM sign in

window includes a checkbox for “Sign in automatically”, which causes the IM tool to automatically logon to the IM tool; students should be careful to not check this box for security purposes.

Blackboard IM uses synchronous communication which could be a major challenge in group projects when all group members need to be available. Scheduling would require an agreed-upon time by all members. In addition, communication would need to take place in advance so that only one group member creates the collaboration windows from the IM interface to avoid duplication of resources and confusion among participants.

While exploring this tool as part of the research for this project, technical issues arose which may or may not have been a result of permissions set for students. When using the “Call” feature with video, some video appeared while others did not. Further practice in using this tool in the classroom might solve many problems brought on by unfamiliarity.

Integration Strategies. As a web-based collaboration delivery mechanism, Blackboard IM would be most useful as a tool to bring students together outside the classroom. This tool could be very useful primarily because of the synchronous communication, even though it is a challenge, because students would have to communicate and commit to the online meeting time in order to participate in the collaboration; unlike asynchronous methods, Blackboard IM collaboration prohibits procrastination unless such is agreed upon by the entire group.

Summary

With the increase in technology, a need for online communication tools has become a necessity for both traditional and distance learners. After researching and experimenting with the different synchronous and asynchronous communication tools that Blackboard offers, we have come to the conclusion that they all possess very similar characteristics. Our group has come to the consensus that each tool has its advantages and disadvantages. For instance, the synchronous communication tools Blackboard Collaborate and Blackboard IM offer are that they both allow students and teachers to meet at the same time via video, calls, or instant messaging. A major benefit that Blackboard Collaborate has over Blackboard IM is that it allows a moderator to have complete control over the session. This factor is helpful to ensure the efficiency of a session, especially when multiple users are in attendance. Both of the previously mentioned tools allow users to work on a whiteboard, which helps to aid visual learners. After gaining experience with both, our group decided that we preferred Blackboard IM to Collaborate to complete this project due to the user-friendly setup of IM.

A major disadvantage of the Blackboard Communication tools as a whole is that users, excluding students, must purchase the Blackboard software in order to use the tools at all. This

could be a significant obstacle to potential users due to the fact that there are many other communication tools available for download with little or no cost. Overall, our group found that the tools we researched in this project could be very beneficial in and out of the classroom if the school or school district has the appropriate hardware and bandwidth in place, has already purchased Blackboard and is willing to allow all teachers to use all of the program's available features for communication and instruction.

References

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<http://www.blackboard.com/docs/documentation.htm?DocID=611013PDF>

Voice Podcaster:

<http://www.blackboard.com/docs/documentation.htm?DocID=611013PDF>

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

Blackboard IM:

<http://library.blackboard.com/ref/be431ef8-1a8e-41f9-9c40-225fde30cc2e/index.htm>