Blackboard World Conference 2018

Activities Attended & Statements of Value

Greg Erianne, Ph.D., Assoc. Professor of Biology

Two major themes of the 2018 Blackboard World Conference that were of great interest to me were 1) Accessibility and 2) Analytics and predicting student performance.

The majority of the sessions (listed below) that I chose to attend were directed by my specific interests in those two topics.

The conference overall was extremely valuable and informative, not only for pointing out some specific features of Blackboard that would be useful in my own online courses, but elucidating several Blackboard tools that we currently do NOT use at CCM, but that are critical to the success of our efforts in making our online courses accessible (Blackboard Ally) and helping us to predict which students might be successful in our courses, and which students would be at-risk (Blackboard Analytics and Blackboard Predict).

Over the course of several sessions dealing with Accessibility and Inclusive Education, I was exposed to the concept that courses should not merely be 'accessible' but should be designed to meet the needs of all students regardless of difficulty, and importantly this shouldn't be done reactively, but proactively, *before students ever declares that they will need an accommodation. That is, the electronic landscape should be accessible, without someone having to ask. Additionally, when considering accessibility features, the ultimate aim is to build course materials using universal design principles that will enrich learning for students with, and without, accommodations or disabilities.*

Toward the aim of making our online courses accessible, the sessions on Blackboard Ally were especially informative. Blackboard Ally "is a revolutionary product that integrates seamlessly into the Learning Management System and focuses on making digital course content more accessible." This software can pinpoint those areas of course materials that are not fully accessible (though its accessibility checker) so it is easier for faculty to revise their instructional

materials to be more universally designed. In addition, Ally can produce documents from a template document in a number of different accessible formats, e.g., PDF, HTML, and others.

Some other considerations for inclusive education were also discussed including emphasis on high-impact, low-complexity activities that can generate a high return on investment, e.g., captioning. Ensemble was one of the tools discussed as being much more accurate than YouTube captioning software. Also discussed were some practices helpful for non-traditional age students, including the value of rapid feedback and helping students understand their academic environment and how to maximize their student experience.

With regards to inclusive education, it was stressed that tools to diagnose student difficulties – and predict student success/failure - were critical features in maximizing the students learning experience and increasing the likelihood that students would be successful.

In this area, Blackboard Analytics would be most valuable since it takes data from several different sources, including the Blackboard Grade Center and the school's student database, and can produce multiple reports designed especially for various stakeholders, that can predict which students are most likely to be in need of additional assistance, e.g., tutoring center, one-on-one tutoring, etc.

Blackboard Predict is another critical tool since it can predict student success DURING the running of a course, when there is still time to intervene and provide assistance to at-risk students. This tool, like Analytics, collects data from several sources and generates ongoing reports as a semester progresses. It can send alerts to stakeholders most likely to be able to influence an at-risk student's chance of being successful in a course.

Besides the very informative sessions on Accessibility and Analytics, there were a few other sessions that I found useful. One of these sessions dealt with using mobile devices in the classroom and student engagement. Since I am going to begin using Learning Catalytics (Pearson) in fall 2018 and students will be using their mobile devices to respond to polls/questions, this was an especially relevant session to me.

Another Blackboard software module that seemed extremely useful was Collaborate, which can function over WiFi and can also be used in the classroom. The software is especially valuable as a conferencing tool in online classes. Back in the classroom, collaborate allows remote participation and allows others to attend classes, e.g., colleagues, chat messages can be exchanged, lectures can be recorded, and live captioning can be included.

The General Session and Keynote (Thursday, July 19) was very enlightening. The Keynote speaker was Dr. Shankar Vndantam from National Public Radio, and his topic was "The Hidden Brain." Dr. Vedantam focused his talk on engagement and communication with students, and how the hidden brain (subsconscious) unknowingly affects student behavior. He provided some tips for better influencing students' behavior, e.g., the principle that "the messenger IS the target" and how to use it to better influence student behavior because of cognitive dissonance.

This was the first time I attended a Blackboard World Conference, and I feel extremely fortunate to have been one of the people chosen to attend the conference. There really was a wealth of information that I took away from the conference that I can immediately apply to my online courses, or to the online portion of my hybrid courses. I know some of these techniques will help me to improve the student success rate in my courses, and I'm confident that incorporation of these techniques will improve my students' learning and their overall experience in my courses.

Having been exposed to these tools during the Conference, and as I stated in the beginning of this narrative, I think it's especially important for CCM to investigate the potential of Blackboard Ally, Blackboard Analytics, and Blackboard Predict to increase our online course accessibility and to help faculty better understand which students may be most at-risk of not being successful in our courses. I think these tools will go a long way toward making our Virtual Campus the success I know it has the potential to be.

I would like to thank former Vice President of CCM Academic Affairs, Dr. Dwight Smith, for allowing me to attend the conference, and I would also like to thank the CCM Center for Teaching and Learning for funding part of this wonderful experience.