Blackboard Learn Ultra & Microsoft Teams: How Seamless Integration Is Driving Greater Student Connection and Engagement at Northumbria University

Collaboration and communication have grown exponentially with the integration of the Microsoft Teams LTI app in Learn Ultra.

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

From its roots as a college founded in 1880, Northumbria University has grown into one of the largest and most respected higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. As part of its mission to prepare students to address the challenges of our era, its leaders have been proactive about incorporating EdTech tools into teaching and learning to support their curiosity and engagement.

INSTITUTION TYPE:

PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

LOCATION:

NEWCASTLE, ENGLAND

POPULATION:

40,000

ANTHOLOGY PRODUCT:

Blackboard LEARN

anthology
Advancing Knowledge

The Challenges

With almost 40,000 students from 137 countries learning on campus and online, Northumbria was an early and enthusiastic adopter of Blackboard® Learn to support a comprehensive and cohesive classroom and learning experience. The university also provided valuable insights during the development of Learn Ultra with feedback about potential improvements and upgrades based on student and instructor experiences.

Those included comments and ideas about an early Microsoft Teams functionality within Learn Ultra. "People naturally started to experiment: 'Oh, how could I use this alongside Blackboard?'" recalled Lee Hall, head of technology enhanced learning at Northumbria University.

In addition to supporting greater information sharing, coordination, and even camaraderie, Northumbria's early embrace of the feature paid off at the onset of the pandemic, when the university had to rely on the virtual learning environment/learning management system for everything from lectures to student support.

But the functionality had serious limitations, such as forcing instructors to manually add students to Teams channels for various classes and manage settings and permissions. This quickly proved extremely cumbersome and time-consuming with large classes.

The Solutions

The integration of the Microsoft Teams LTI app in Learn Ultra and, specifically, the ability to automate previously manual tasks was "a game changer," according to Hall. "We really didn't start to see huge benefits until the full integration was built."

The integration enables instructors to easily create a Teams channel in one click and automatically populate it with students and the appropriate permissions, saving significant time and effort. They can also open sub-channels for breakout sessions and group work. Students can use the chat to ask or answer questions and make comments during a class.

The integration also leverages Microsoft Office 365 for even more seamless collaboration. Previously, working on projects together required students to go outside of the Learn Ultra environment to download, share, edit, and upload files. Now, they can work together in Teams on Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, or Microsoft PowerPoint projects and submit them within the virtual learning environment—a faster, simpler, and much more streamlined process.

"Having those within the Teams channel as an extension of Blackboard [Learn] Ultra allows for that ease of integration and allows them to collaboratively work on documents and share them with one another," said Hall. "Collaboration and communication have really grown exponentially on our programs of study and in our modules."

Microsoft's brand recognition and its omnipresence in the business world have also encouraged students to use Office tools for classwork and projects. "You're going to be using that in your workplace, and therefore, it's a good graduate skill to develop," said Hall.

> The students feel more engaged in terms of their ability to very quickly communicate with their colleagues and with the staff.

Lee Hall
Head of Technology
Enhanced Learning
Northumbria University

Insights Delivered

Fostering Connection and Community

In addition to enhanced collaboration, students benefit from the social aspect that Teams helps cultivate with the ability to introduce themselves and get to know classmates via remote meetings and the chat function. "Some of these modules that we're teaching, they're huge numbers and not everyone knows each other," said Hall, who noted that students love the ability to have the kind of "quick and easy" chats that the integration supports. "By putting them into teams and having the chat functionality put them into groups, they can build those relationships quicker than just through the VLE on its own," said Hall. "They still make good social relationships when face-to-face, but a lot of the development of those richer relationships are done via virtual means, and therefore, it's a huge addition."

The ability to interact with other students on Teams was especially important during pandemic lockdowns and continued to be an advantage afterward, as remote attendance at school and at work became a normal part of life. "Times have changed, and it's even more central that we have a product such as Teams integrated with our virtual learning environment," said Hall. "That feeling of being part of their module, part of a community, it's worth its weight in gold for me."

The greater social interaction has even led to improved student outcomes as students are able to work together more productively and for longer periods. It's also beneficial for instructors to keep tabs on those communications when students are working on assignments, noted Daniel Rippon, assistant professor in psychology at Northumbria University. "Microsoft Teams has improved remote communications between students, in that staff can monitor and also respond to them in order to ensure that students are staying on track with their specific projects," said Rippon.

Epilogue

An Immersive Learning Experience

These technologies are driving a new modality that combines physical and online presence and collaboration. Hall has noticed students using multiple devices all at once to envelop themselves in a learning environment wherever they are. "Whether it's the Blackboard [Learn] app or the Teams app, they have that ability to carry on the conversation, carry on the learning, and carry on the development seamlessly," he said. "They'll be working on a live document at a table with a massive screen, all working on one document, but then they're all on the laptops on the same document, and they may be chatting to each other via the Teams app or chatting to another module. It's almost as if they're in a working group all day long."

This kind of hybrid multitasking, and the efficiencies it supports, has the potential to transform the nature of the student experience, not to mention the expectations of the working world in the future. As such, in addition to being an opportunity for enriching student engagement and improving learning outcomes, it also presents a challenge for university leaders, who want to make sure students feel able to occasionally turn away from the demands of schoolwork and their future jobs to disconnect and relax.

Anthology as a Trusted Partner

Working with Blackboard Learn and Anthology over the years has shown Hall that the company actively welcomes feedback and will work to perfect and expand its products in line with user needs and preferences. "They're seen to be delivering," he said, noting the quick response to the request for a more comprehensive Teams integration.

He also appreciates the willingness to partner with other tech companies to integrate apps that are already in wide use across office ecosystems. "To see them running in parallel with a big player like Microsoft, it speaks volumes," said Hall.

He's confident that as future needs evolve and as artificial intelligence gathers steam, Anthology will continue to integrate those technologies in a thoughtful way that benefits users and supports ongoing creativity and innovation in how students learn, connect, and work.

> Our staff are really pleased with how Teams integrates within Blackboard [Learn] Ultra. And the students see that extension of the VLE as just another great offering within the technology-enhanced learning realm at Northumbria University.

Lee Hall, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning, Northumbria University

Learn more about the **Microsoft & Anthology** partnership and integrations.

Products highlighted in this success story:

Blackboard LEARN

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