

# Using Blackboard and Social Networking to Support Student Learning.

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I have used a simulation exercise as part of the assessment for the module, POLI2003: The Politics of the European Union since 2004/05. Over time the exercise has evolved to take account of the enormous effort students devote to preparing for the assessment and of their commentary and feedback on the process. Now the final four weeks of contact are devoted to planning and preparing for the event, and students submit source evaluations and pre-simulation reports on their respective country delegation's negotiating strategy for individual assessment in advance of the group assessment which is a day long event. Whilst, the nature of the event has changed over time to enhance the students' employability skills (communication, group work, leadership, delegation, working to short notice and time constrained deadlines), Blackboard's function as an interactive learning support tool has remained constant. Nevertheless, as the simulation has evolved, it has become apparent that Blackboard is not the only electronic tool available to this end. In an era of social networking, Blackboard appears inflexible and more formal than other tools such as Facebook and Twitter. Nevertheless, it still forms an integral part of the preparation for the simulation. [This piece will outline how Blackboard is used to support the simulation exercise, and how Facebook can enhance, but not replace, existing provision, and the learning experience of students.](#)

Blackboard is integral to the simulation exercise. Students are expected to use its interface to engage with the other members of their delegations. To this end, delegation group pages with email facility, discussion boards and file exchanges are set up. From here students are able to set up meetings with one another, discuss ideas and share documents they have found which will be useful to writing their negotiating strategies. In addition, cross delegation pages are set up on which students must post their individual pre-simulation reports on a specified aspect of the policy area under discussion. The purpose of these pages is to enable students to access and evaluate the negotiating strategies of other delegations in the simulation, and identify areas of possible shared interest and collaboration ahead of the day long event. There is also an area of the site dedicated to the simulation exercise itself, from which information relating to the event (timings, locations, briefs etc) are posted, together with documents of generic interest.

Whilst students engage with Blackboard for the purposes of posting their pre-simulation reports and planning with fellow members of their delegation, Blackboard does not enable students to establish a sense of community or ownership of the assessment. This is problematic as students are expected to set the agenda for discussion during the event. It is also counter to my own underlying philosophy of empowering students as shapers of academic debate rather than mere observers or commentators. This has led me to consider less formal mechanisms by which to establish that sense of community and ownership, in this instance via Facebook.

The Facebook group for the simulation exercise was open to all students, and participation was voluntary. I felt this was important as not all students wish to engage in such an informal setting outside University, and not all students on the

module had a Facebook profile. Of the 30 students registered to take the assessment 24 joined the group. The group was set to enable any member to post documents and write ideas and questions on the site's wall. Students did not have to befriend any one in the group to be able to join in. The purpose of the group was to facilitate debate which was accessible at the time of the students' and tutor's choosing.

The key benefits of the group were that discussion could take place in an informal and relaxed setting, and the group page was easily accessible and navigable. All participants were notified when another member posted on the group wall, so it was not necessary to keep checking "just in case". As the event took place immediately after the Easter vacation this year, the site facilitated continued contact and discussions at a time when face to face meetings were impractical.

A problem with Facebook is that not all students wish to participate and some do not have Facebook profiles. This can lead to concerns about exclusion, and I was careful to ensure that any material posted on the group page was cross posted on Blackboard. This has obvious time implications. In addition student participation on the Blackboard interface can also be unequal and inconsistent. Furthermore, not all academics might be prepared to engage with their students in such an informal context. Whilst there is no need to befriend a student in order for the group to function, the use of social networking can be seen by students to imply 24/7 availability of staff, so clear guidelines on how and when we reply to student queries via this interface need to be established. Being on a fractional contract, I found the interface particularly useful, as I could fit in access and posting around my numerous and varied commitments.

The following points are worth considering. Facebook does not replace face to face contact or Blackboard, but complements and supplements these processes. In fact students now have more class based focus to the assessment than ever before. Facebook supplemented the students' learning well. Participation rates were high, and the students stated that they found it a better virtual environment for shared learning than Blackboard. Indeed, some delegations set up their own Facebook groups to facilitate continued contact and discussion during the Easter break. Early findings appear to support established social learning theories, and are worthy of further exploration. It is my intention to set up Facebook groups for my level six dissertation students and the module, The Politics of Nationalism for the 2011-12 academic year.