



Utilizing Top Hat and Collaborate Ultra for Student Engagement in Concurrent Synchronous and In-Person Classrooms

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Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic challenged educators to find creative and engaging ways to connect and meet the needs of students at a pace no one was expecting. Overnight the University was shut down and was reopened in a completely remote learning format. Perhaps we were headed in the direction of more remote learning, but it was remarkable the speed at which this switch occurred. The degree to which this virtual pedagogy was implemented forced educators to become more accessible and flexible to meet the needs of burdened students.

When the pandemic occurred, there was an immediate shift to the online classroom, to synchronous or asynchronous classes. Most of us became quite familiar with those blank squares we called students that filled the screens we called classrooms. We talked to them as if they were listening, but we were never confident they were. Occasionally there was some sort of affirmation in the chat box that there was life out there, but beyond that, we hoped we were not just talking to our cats and dogs.

As educators, we are aware of the various competing demands that impact students' ability and willingness to engage and contribute in the classroom. Students miss class to play the role of caregiver, athlete, parent, and employee. Economic and social factors along with COVID-related illness all compounded to increase the number of students who were missing class. While many students were absent from class, students also reported a need to have synchronous learning and social connections. These authors sought to find a way to keep students actively engaged in the synchronous online class. The solution: [Top Hat](#) run through the Blackboard Collaborate Virtual Classroom.

Top Hat is an online platform that was built with the idea that students would use their smartphones to participate in class. Educators could create interactive experiences through homework, quizzes, lecture notes, and presentations, while students could respond, answer or engage as required through their mobile devices. Initially, this was designed for students sitting in the classroom to increase student engagement and participation for those sitting in seats in the class.

These authors soon discovered, however, that when we ran Top Hat through Blackboard Collaborate we could have meaningful interaction with the classroom. Students were more

inclined to participate when there was anonymity provided by Top Hat to answer questions, but we could still have the benefit of a synchronous live classroom. Students were able to talk, give presentations, and utilize breakout rooms (where cameras were more likely to be turned on) for group collaboration.



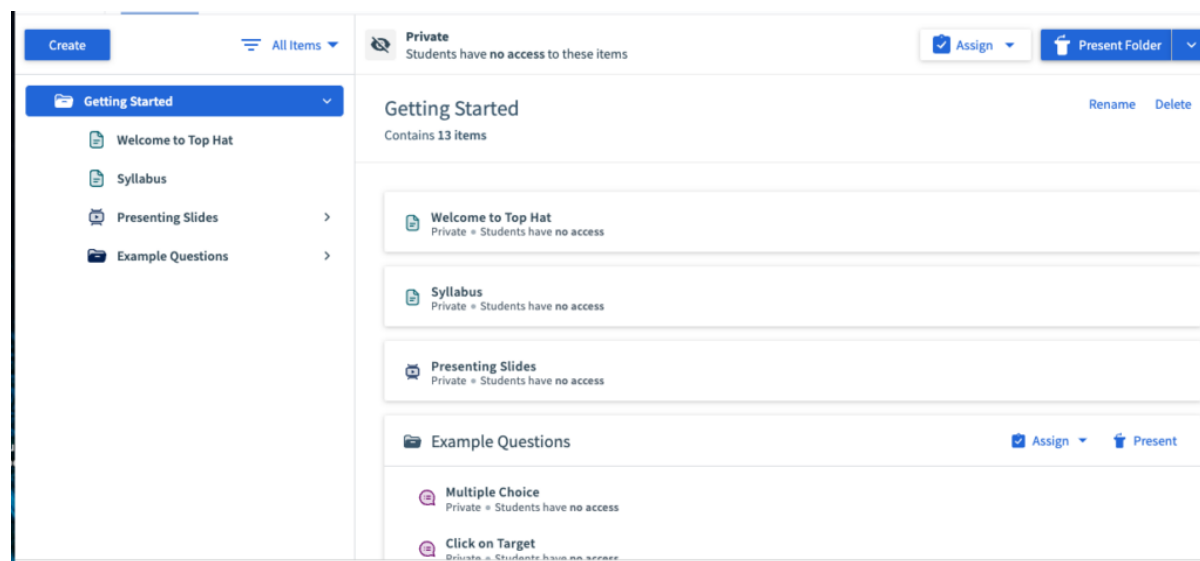
Photo by [Karolina Grabowska](#).

Continuing with this dual platform became a bigger benefit when we began to move classes back to campus. We encouraged students to stay home if they were sick and we know that our students already have other demands that often keep them from attending class for various reasons. This dual-platform format provided a way for students to participate and “attend” class from wherever they were: if they were homesick, at the hospital with a loved one, stuck in Canada because the bridge was closed, or if they were on the bus with the softball team traveling to a game. Students could log in from their computers to the blackboard classroom and either on a separate device or the same device log into Top Hat and participate with the rest of the class. If the class was doing group work, they could be put into a group with students who were on the ground or other virtual students and continue to participate as if they were on the ground. This format allowed for a seamless transition for both students and faculty. If faculty were sick or unable to attend class for whatever reason, the class could be transitioned to an online format quickly and students



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could all join and participate seamlessly.



Top Hat Instructor workspace.

The overarching benefit of using these two platforms together is the ease of student engagement for both on-ground and online learners and the seamless blending and transitions between these two worlds. Additional benefits of using Top Hat with Blackboard Collaborate include that it allows educators to save time during class by preloading questions into Top Hat. Once student responses to questions are entered, the Top Hat grade book can be synched to the Blackboard Collaborate grade book. Grading can be scored according to participation, correctness, or a combination of both. In our classes, as the semester goes on and students become more comfortable with the platform, grading moves from more heavily weighted on participation to correctness. Some questions can be utilized for formative assessment to see where the class is in understanding concepts. There are multiple question-type options for use. Additional advantages include ease of use with uploading videos and connecting to external resources with hyperlinks - rarely have we seen the “blue spinning circle of doom” taking up our time in the classroom while students retreat to talking and other distractions.

Finally, this is our mission. As we strive for excellence in education we must be compassionate and find ways to meet our students where they are. We understand that “life happens” and sometimes you are going to get a flat tire on the way home from work that is going to keep you from coming to class the next day. We still want you to be able to not only get the information from class but feel like you are part of the class. Using Top Hat with Blackboard Collaborate allows students that opportunity.

As we continue to move through this pandemic as educators, we must also move through it as learners like our students. We continue to learn new and innovative ways to engage our



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students in the classroom, on-ground and virtually, and sometimes both at the same time. While we could have done without the loss COVID-19 has brought us, we are grateful for the much-needed push it gave us to explore [Excellence in Teaching and Learning](#).