

3/1/2021

To: Faculty Senate

From: John Jones, Director, Media Resources Center

Re: Master Classroom and Blackboard Updates

I would like to speak to the Faculty Senate to address two important pieces of information that we need to share with Faculty.

- New Master Classroom technology
- Blackboard Ultra migration and upcoming changes

## Master Classroom Technology

### Executive Summary

Thanks to federal COVID-19 funding, many master classrooms have been upgraded with cameras and other functionality to make it possible to broadcast lectures from those classrooms to overflow rooms or participants at home.

A feature of these cameras as they have been installed is that they are networked for support purposes. The feed from those cameras can be viewed and in limited ways controlled remotely. This use is limited to service to the classroom technology.

### Background

In the last quarter of 2020, we had an opportunity to add technology to many of our master classrooms around campus. These upgrades were designed to make it possible to teach from a master classroom to an audience that includes remote students – students sitting in an overflow room at another location on campus, or students participating from home.

This opportunity was possible because of federal SPARK money provided to help WSU pay for technology upgrades necessary for our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The money needed to be used, and the technology installed by the end of 2020, so our timelines were very short.

There are a couple of key points of information about the upgrades:

### How were specific rooms selected?

The Media Resources Center worked in partnership with the Registrar's office to identify the master classrooms that would be upgraded. These prioritized criteria were used to select rooms for upgrades:

1. Classrooms that are general use (not controlled by an individual college or department)
2. Typical usage rates for the classroom (favoring rooms that get a lot of use)
3. Classrooms that had the right base technology to make the installation possible/affordable

### Network Support for Master Classrooms

In general, Master Classrooms have been designed with their technology networked so that the devices in the rooms can be supported and in some cases controlled remotely. This is an important efficiency for the Campus Media Services team, making it possible for a very small staff to support classrooms all over campus quickly and efficiently.

The addition of cameras to the suite of tools that are networked for support means that it is possible for a technician in the Campus Media Services office to see through that camera if they bring it up on their computer.

This is an important tool for the support team – if they're on the phone with someone who is having problems in a master classroom, they can bring up the camera and have the ability to see what the person is doing or what is showing on the display, and often help troubleshoot the problem the users are having.

However, the presence of these cameras could be perceived as unwelcome monitoring of the classrooms. We have implemented these standards and limits to avoid that issue:

- No audio is transmitted with the camera signal – so while someone looking at the image might be able to see the classroom, they can't hear anything going on in the room.
- No recording is made of activity in the rooms
- No one in CMS actively monitors these classroom cameras in an ongoing way. The cameras are reviewed periodically throughout the day for the following purposes:
  - To try to identify classrooms that have been left on for the purpose of dispatching a technician to shut down the equipment
  - To ensure that the camera signals are still active and available for use in the classroom (and remote classroom)
  - To aid in troubleshooting if the monitoring systems alert CMS of technical issues in the room

New training on this technology is available through the Media Resources Center. Email [mrc@wichita.edu](mailto:mrc@wichita.edu) to get

## Blackboard Ultra Migration and upcoming changes

### Executive Summary

Wichita State's Blackboard Learning Management service needs to be replaced with a more modern system. Based on feedback from an LMS review conducted years ago as well other crucial considerations like financial costs and the ease of transition, Blackboard's Ultra product was selected.

The transition will take place in a very gradual way over the course of the next two years.

- We started by migrating to the new server environment over Christmas.
- Early adopters are now trying out the new Ultra experience on a test server, and will be able to start teaching in the new format this summer and fall
- At the start of the Summer term 2021, we will switch to a new look and feel for the landing page and frame of the site; this should not impact courses, which can still be taught in the Blackboard Learn format.
- Faculty will be provided with copies of their classes in Ultra format, given training and support in a variety of ways, and invited to start experimenting with teaching in Ultra in the Spring of 2022 and following semesters, with the goal of having everyone migrated to Ultra by the Spring of 2023.

### Background

In 2016, the Office of Online Learning and the Media Resources Center pulled together a large faculty committee to work on a process that would evaluate and consider leading Learning Management Systems as we looked ahead at a possible migration to a new platform.

The leading contenders were Canvas and Blackboard Ultra, which is Blackboard's equivalent of the more modern look and feel of Canvas. Both platforms scored well with the committee, getting high marks for their user experience and interface. They had comparable functionality, with Canvas (assuming a suite of add-on tools) having an edge because of the relative youth of the Ultra platform.

We gathered a lot of good feedback and information at the time, but the process was stopped because of other priorities that were going to be putting new demands on faculty – the agreement with the National Federation of the Blind, and the resulting updates and attention to accessibility of instruction.

More recently, the question of a need to migrate came up again, but the landscape had changed dramatically. The Ultra platform, which was already competitive with Canvas, had continued to improve and now is a solid equivalent for functionality with Canvas.

However, other considerations made it clear that Ultra was clearly the better choice.

- The migration process to Ultra is much less expensive and challenging

- Migrating to Canvas would have to be done in a single, high-impact, expensive move. It would require paying for both platforms during an overlap period, a great deal of time and expense in trying to prepare all classes simultaneously for the migration, and a huge training program that would have to get everyone up to speed on Canvas at the same time.
- Ultra, on the other hand, presents a much more gradual, easy to swallow migration. We can make changes gradually, over the course of 1-2 years, which gives us time to work with early adopters, identify problems, and provide more complete support for faculty making the switch
- Because of our other contracts with Blackboard for things other than the learning management system, we are better able to leverage our bargaining position, and in the end the Blackboard Ultra-based solution is less expensive than the Canvas-based solution.

So, given the financial realities we face now, and have been facing for years, a solution that does not present us with major additional expenses for the migration was the only solution that made sense to consider.

### Migration to Ultra

The process has already started.

#### Step 1: Migrate to SaaS

Over the holiday break we moved our Blackboard hosting service from the Managed Hosting environment to their Software as a Service or SaaS environment.

The SaaS environment puts us in the right place for switching to Ultra – we are on the servers that deliver Ultra for Blackboard, and it is a much more modern, robust environment. Because these servers always run on the most recent code base, we will not have to schedule downtime for upgrades in the future the way we have in the past.

We're there now, and while we did have some bumps in the road right after the holidays with the integration with the university's Banner student information system, those have been worked through and we should not need to adjust those again.

#### The Ultra Pilot Program

Carolyn Speer, Director of the Office of Instructional Resources, has put together a group of early adopters who are experimenting with Blackboard Ultra on a test server, learning how to use the tools and build classes in that environment. These early adopters will help us work through some early challenges and make sure that our training later this summer is as good as it can be.

The participants in the Ultra pilot have been giving the platform rave reviews, and they're all excited to teach in the new environment.

### Transition to Ultra Base Navigation

In the heartbeat between the Spring and Summer Semesters, we will make a transition from the Blackboard Learn base navigation to the Ultra base navigation.

This will make some look and feel changes to the blackboard landing pages, cutting down significantly on distractions and presenting a more streamlined, modern look. This change, however, should not impact course delivery (with the exception of the look and feel of the site that surrounds the course).

### Migrating Courses from Learn to Ultra

Office of Instructional Resources Staff and early adopter instructors will start to deliver courses in Ultra in the summer and fall.

For other instructors, they will have a year to gradually migrate from Learn to Ultra for instruction. There will be a lot of training and support to support the move. The goal is to have all instruction delivered in the Ultra platform by the Spring semester of 2023.

### Migration Support

In addition to the support that the Office of Instructional Resources provides, we will be providing some additional support. Look for training videos, information sessions, and ARC events in the future that will prepare faculty for the new environment.

In addition, the university is working with a third-party service provider called K16 to make some course-building available to instructors who want to start thinking about the transition to Ultra.

**K16 Migration Assistance:** K16 will produce a copy of existing classes on the Blackboard Learn server, reformatted and imported into the Ultra format

- This will be a copy; old Blackboard Learn versions will still be in place
- This will provide a head start in getting classes ready to teach in Ultra. It won't be the finished product, some training and finishing touches will be necessary, but it will do a lot of heavy lifting
- This process will be run for all classes with content in them on the Learn server later this spring. It can be repeated, later, if necessary, for specific classes

**K16 Course "Scaffolding":** K16 also provides a service that will roll out more slowly, to targeted groups, that provides a systemic walk-through for course construction for the Ultra Environment. They call this product "Scaffolding", because it provides support and structure to help guide the construction of a course in the new Ultra environment.

The tool walks users through the content they need to create and then delivers it in the Ultra format. The wizards can be customized to meet the needs of specific programs.

The use of the K16 Scaffolding tool will be an optional, opt-in tool for participants in a course quality program we will be launching later in the year.