Enabling Active-Learning at Ghent University

Establishing an active learning model by moving content online

Interviewee: Professor Veerle Fack

AT A GLANCE

Client: Ghent University, Belgium
Learners: 65/41,000
Industry: Higher Education

Challenge:

• To provide a learning management system (LMS) that complemented Ghent University’s own education strategy, the promotion and encouragement of active learning.
• To provide an online pool of source material that enables students to learn ahead of practical programming sessions

Solution:

• Brightspace
• Quizzes

Results:

• An online bank of multimedia content enabling 65 students to actively learn ahead of practical lessons, building on their practical skills
• Providing lecturers with the flexibility to deliver overall learning pathways and update content as courses progress, catering for individual student needs
• Flipped learning model where lecturers can provide feedback on activities within lessons
“For me it is easy and intuitive. The video tutorials are very helpful. If I want to experiment with more advanced functionality, I simply look at the Brightspace videos and they’ll have the answers I need. As a user, you can definitely find your own way around with Brightspace. It is very consistent in the way things are done. Once you’ve mastered the skill to implement something more advanced, it’s easy to do it in another part of the system.”

Professor Veerle Fack, Ghent University

**INTRODUCTION**

Ghent University is a public research university located in Ghent, Belgium. Ghent University is a top 100 university and one of Belgium’s largest leading institutions of higher education, with over 41,000 students and 9,000 staff members. UGent has campuses not only in in the Ghent region, but also in Courtrai, Ostend, Bruges and South Korea.

A key aspect of Ghent University’s educational strategy is the promotion and encouragement of active learning, wherein students can study more practically and develop an ongoing learning behaviour, rather than passively receiving information from lecturers.

This is a major initiative for the University, and D2L’s Brightspace platform was chosen as the learning management system (LMS) best-suited to facilitate this change. Ghent University deployed the Brightspace platform across the University in phases, with a university-wide rollout completed in September 2019.

The robust feature set has inspired lecturers to embark on additional, interactive and creative new teaching models—enabling lecturers to pursue more rewarding classroom activities or lesson plans.

In the lead up to the full deployment in September 2019, the Brightspace platform was used by a number of professors and lecturers from varied academic disciplines so that they might share their experiences with other professors and lecturers ahead of the full rollout. We will be sharing three stories showcasing how these lecturers are using the Brightspace platform in innovative ways.

**Read Annelies Decloedt’s story here.**
**Read Sofie Hondeghem’s story here.**

Here are the experiences of Professor Veerle Fack—Department of Applied mathematics, computer science and statistics.
PROFESSOR VEERLE FACK

Professor Veerle Fack runs a variety of courses at undergraduate and masters levels in computer science with a focus on informatics algorithms. There are 40 students in her masters’ course and 25 across her undergraduate course.

The foundations of Professor Fack’s courses are problem solving and computational thinking, which are demonstrated in the classroom with programming tasks.

“I am teaching the background of how to develop ideas and solve problems. There are many practical elements to my teaching, but students need to understand the theory first and foremost,” she explains.

Professor Fack spared no time in using the Brightspace platform to pursue the flipped classroom model, an ultimate goal for the University as a whole.

“In the first semester of the rollout, I did an experiment with a flipped classroom and active learning model. I asked the students to watch videos before they came to class, and then during class we would discuss the problems and undertake programming exercises.

“Brightspace is a real help for me when it comes to building a course like this. I don’t have traditional lecture notes for my students to read, but I have videos and exercises and website links. Brightspace allows me to utilise this rich content in a coherent system that guides students to the materials they need to learn. So far, my students are reacting very positively to the flipped classroom approach, and this wouldn’t be possible without Brightspace.”

At the outset of the pilot, Professor Flack also began experimenting with other features of the Brightspace platform, such as the assignments tool—although she admits she’s not yet using it to its fullest potential.

“The way I use it now is relatively simple. I see it can be useful for more advanced grading and feedback methods, but I’m still a little unfamiliar with it. That said, it is still the first stage of the rollout, and I’m enjoying experimenting with all the functionalities so far.”

However, she praises the Brightspace platform’s ease of use.
"For me it is easy and intuitive. The video tutorials are very helpful. If I want to experiment with more advanced functionality, I simply look at the Brightspace videos and they'll have the answers I need. As a user, you can definitely find your own way around with Brightspace. It is very consistent in the way things are done. Once you've mastered the skill to implement something more advanced, it's easy to do it in another part of the system."

As her knowledge of the systems and features within the Brightspace platform grows, Professor Fack has ambitious plans for using even more of the functionality, including rubrics which allow a lecturer to establish set criteria for grading assignments, display the number of points students were awarded for each criterion after an assignment, and to provide customised feedback.

"I plan to start using rubrics to providing feedback for my students. I am also in the process of creating a new bank of quizzes that I can use across my courses. I've already been passing my knowledge onto other lecturers who are not currently on the pilot programme. This has been through demos, but I also recently gave a talk on the active learning approach. I'm intrigued to see how my colleagues will use Brightspace to push forward the flipped classroom approach."

Although a university-wide initiative for active learning and the flipped classroom is an ambitious project, Professor Fack is confident that the Brightspace platform will help UGent and its lecturers achieve it.

"Brightspace helps me easily build an overall learning path and then link the different content and topics and so on. I have used a lot of learning environments in the past and this is the first one I've used for a full year and thought, yes, I want to continue with this one. I'm still scratching the surface of the functionalities, but I have the feeling that I can continue and make things better. Brightspace helps me both in terms of what I would like to achieve with my students and the way in which I would like to teach. This makes me very happy."

Professor Veerle Fack, Ghent University