



# Enabling Active-Learning at Ghent University

Classrooms vs. workshops — creating new learning experiences

**Interviewee: Lecturer Sofie Hondegheem**

## AT A GLANCE

**Client:** Ghent University, Belgium

**Learners:** 450/41,000

**Industry:** Higher Education

### Challenge:

- To provide a learning management system (LMS) that complimented Ghent University's own education strategy, the promotion and encouragement of active learning.
- To provide a remote platform that allows students to study more practically and develop an ongoing learning behaviour.
- To alleviate the pressures and ease the workload of lecturers by enabling more flexible teaching models

### Solution:

- Brightspace

### Results:

- Flipped-learning approach, where students can learn online ahead of lessons with the opportunity to practice or relearn and perform peer or self-evaluation
- A new method for lecturers to provide feedback for students' work, in which 450 students can be divided into groups with marking and content moving online
- Online discussion forums where lecturers can assess and monitor student feedback

*“In this model, the class itself becomes a workshop. The groups read the outlines and filled out the checklist that we provided through Brightspace. At the end of the workshop, they had to choose one of those paragraphs as their group’s contribution, which they then uploaded to Brightspace.”*

*Lecturer Sofie Hondeghem, 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 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 Veerle Fack’s story here.](#)

[Read Annelies Decloedt’s story here.](#)

Here are the experiences of Sofie Hondeghem, English Lecturer in the Faculty of Economics.

## LECTURER SOFIE HONDEGHEM

Lecturer Sofie Hondeghem has been using the Brightspace platform with her second-year Bachelor’s students on the Economic English 2 course. The course is well-populated, with 450 students working in 12 parallel groups currently taking it. Along with Hondeghem, there are two other lecturers who teach the course. Hondeghem explains the difficulties this poses for feedback and marking.

“When I started teaching 15 years ago, the whole year was spent teaching. You would have one exam at the end of the year and that was marked manually, so you’d have a few weeks to mark all the exams.



“Now, teaching has changed. We’ve moved from simply imparting knowledge to teaching students skills. If you want to teach skills you have to offer the opportunity to practice, to perform peer evaluation and self-evaluation. If, as we did in the past, you aim to teach knowledge you can test a student once to get a snapshot of what they have learned up to that point. I think the way in which we are doing it now is better for students, more interesting and engaging. However, the work load for teachers has increased substantially.”

*Lecturer Sofie Hondegheem, Ghent University*

With the University pushing forward an active learning teaching initiative, Hondegheem saw a prime opportunity to manage the marking and feedback work without compromising on the quality of the learning experience for her large number of students.

“In our second year we have focused on presentation skills and essay writing skills. Obviously, both of these are very intensive correction-wise. If you want to enable individual presentations, you have to organise many classes just to get them all scheduled. If you want students to write an individual essay you’d need you to correct that for 450 students. That’s not feasible.”

Utilising the Brightspace platform’s Groups functionality, Hondegheem and her colleagues split the them into groups of 100 students and, using

the flipped classroom approach, had these group members access rich content such as videos within Brightspace.

“We used this approach when teaching the students about topic sentences,” explains Hondegheem. “We wanted to have some tasks performed individually, and some in groups to avoid joyriders,” [certain students relying on other members of their group to do all the work].

On the Brightspace platform, individual students would watch a video explaining the topic, and offering a few examples by way of demonstration, as well as providing a checklist of what constitutes a good topic sentence. Then they would perform multiple-choice exercises to identify the sentences in a paragraph. This then progressed to active writing, where learners would have to write the topic sentences themselves.

From there, each student would be asked to prepare an individual paragraph summarising an essay that they were to bring to class.

“In this model, the class itself becomes a workshop,” explains Hondegheem. “The groups read the outlines and filled out the checklist that we provided through Brightspace. At the end of the workshop, they had to choose one of those paragraphs as their group’s contribution, which they then uploaded to Brightspace.”





Using this flipped classroom approach and the Brightspace platform, Hondeghem condenses the work of 450 students into that of 100 groups—a far more manageable marking and feedback task for the three-strong teaching team.

“It’s already a lot easier for us correction-wise. With Brightspace, we are correcting group by group within the platform itself. There is no need to extract the information as a Word document. It’s much easier to give feedback.”

Hondeghem also praises the look of the Brightspace platform, as well as the more detailed trackable metrics it offers.

“The largest difference from our old LMS is layout. Brightspace is cleaner, more attractive and there are many templates to choose from. It’s a lot more useful. Also, there is the ability to track whether students are working in their modules or not. With our old learning platform, we could only check whether they had answered the questions correctly or incorrectly. Now we can see how many times they are performing the exercises and what mistakes they were making. These new, personalised metrics provide great value for us in understanding the individual strengths and weaknesses of our students.”

As part of the initial rollout, UGent encouraged Hondeghem to provide tips and run demos for other members of staff. She’s also beginning to experiment with the additional functionalities of the Brightspace platform.

“We have been also working with the discussion forums, monitoring threads where the students discuss things among themselves. In this way, we can step in to give direct feedback as necessary.”

Hondeghem is also planning to utilise 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.

“Rubrics is something that is completely new. I’ve just made a rubric—which is a scoring guide used to evaluate the quality of student responses—and intend to use it in the next academic year. Based on the assignments I was correcting this year I drew up the variables and the criteria, and it looks like it’ll save us a lot of time and make the correcting a lot more efficient in the future. We’ve only begun experimenting with the features and as time goes on I see even more efficiency gains and more engaging experiences for the students.”