To engage or not to engage? Is the instructor the answer?

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To engage or not to engage? Is the instructor the answer?

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Context: The online cohort

Demographics – typically 25 years or older; 82% female; 52% part-time; 34% from regional locations

Increase in online learning

Retention and completion rates lower than on campus (e.g., 20% lower than face to face – Greenland & Moore, 2014)

Satisfaction and engagement

Context: The University of Tasmania

Context: Demographic characteristics UTAS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student characteristic</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not studying face to face</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted on basis other than secondary results</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in outer regional, remote, and very remote areas</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying less than 70% load</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;24 years of age</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition</td>
<td>28.54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at Core Undergraduate students who have left us, we have identified five key indicators of higher attrition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATAR</th>
<th>Students with a lower ATAR or No ATAR are more likely to not continue or complete their degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>The likelihood of attrition increases with age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of study</td>
<td>Studying by Distance increases the likelihood of attrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time vs Part-time</td>
<td>One in three part-time students don’t continue or complete their degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Campus</td>
<td>Students studying in the NW have a higher likelihood of attrition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attrition rates for distance students 2015-2017: 35.2% compared with 15.5% mixed and on-campus

Impetus for study

Improving the distance delivery experience may alleviate the risk of attrition

Link with student engagement, engagement strategies and role of instructor

• What factors influence students’ engagement in a fully online course?
• What role does the instructor play in influencing students’ levels of engagement?
Engagement

Multi-faceted concept that encompasses behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004)

Includes level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction and enriching educational experiences (Kuh, 2001)

Occurs along a continuum – fluctuates over time

Students told us that they understood engagement as being: active within the course and meeting the task requirements, such as participating in discussions; posting to the class online forum; and completing quizzes.

Background research/literature

Challenges:
- Understanding e-learning technology
- Sense of isolation
- Lack of interaction
- Problems with instructional materials
- Difficulties with time management
- Competing work and family responsibilities

Instructor presence

Role of online teacher or instructor considered vital for building interaction and connectedness between teacher and student, and student and student

"... the quality and timeliness of lecturer feedback was the most valued form of learning communication identified by students regardless of course" (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018, p. 15)

"It is the presence and behaviour of the lecturer, rather than peers, which is key to student engagement online" (Muir, et al., 2019, p. 12).

Learners most valued learner-instructor (Moore, 1993) engagement strategies, with consistent instructor presence considered the most valued engagement strategy (Martin & Bolliger, 2018)

Facilitation strategies (adapted from Martin, et al., 2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Facilitation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Video based instructor introduction&lt;br&gt;Instructor’s presence in discussion forums&lt;br&gt;Able to contact instructor in multiple ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>Video based course orientation&lt;br&gt;Instructor’s timely response to questions&lt;br&gt;Instructor’s weekly announcements to class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical</td>
<td>Instructor’s timely feedback on assignments/projects&lt;br&gt;Instructor’s feedback using various modalities&lt;br&gt;Instructor’s personal responses to student reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>Instructor’s use of various features in synchronous sessions to interact with students&lt;br&gt;Interactive visual stimuli&lt;br&gt;Instructor-created content in the form of short videos/multimedia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study

- Participants
  - 55 pre-service teachers enrolled online in EMT521: Teaching Primary Mathematics 1 in semester 1 2019
  - First of two mathematics pedagogy units in a 2-year Masters of Teaching degree

- Methodology
  - Design-based research (DBR) (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012) to investigate and monitor the impact of a number of facilitation strategies initiated by instructor

- Data
  - Weekly interviews conducted with instructor
  - Discussion board posts
  - Post-semester student surveys, interviews and UTAS student evaluation date (eVALUate)
  - 20 students completed the post-semester survey and 9 participated in interviews

- Results: Introductory videos

I like the fact that every week there was an introductory video and it was current ... it made you feel like you were having a conversation with her and she was talking about things that had actually happened the week before (Kayla, interview)

The weekly videos were a welcome addition to the online format for me. I appreciate the personal nature of them and each week was set out both in writing and verbally. I wish all the other subjects had a weekly intro video like this subject (anonymous eVALUate comment)

93% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they ‘accessed the introduction videos each week’
Results: Discussion boards

Initiatives:
Not mandatory
Limiting topics to 2-3 each week
Providing timely and regular feedback
Creating one thread for each topic
Finish post with a follow-up question

Results: Discussion boards

She regularly posted in the discussion boards, as well as prompted us to think more deeply by asking questions and encouraged us to end our discussion posts with a question for the next poster.

(anonymous open-ended survey response)

Results: Discussion boards

She seemed to prompt more thought and tried to extend or guide thinking which was helpful

(anonymous open-ended survey response)

Results: Discussion boards

Students could be ‘active’ without posting:
While I did not engage in discussion, I was very active in reading the discussion posts. I found them very relevant to the assignments as well as for the end of unit exam

(anonymous open-ended survey response)

Results: Instructor-created content in the form of short videos/multimedia

I would explain to Bethany that we invert the dividing fraction and turn it into a multiplication equation because it is a shortcut ... I would demonstrate both ways so that Bethany had a better understanding of what I meant

(Cara, discussion post, 31/3/2019)

I think it’s an excellent idea to show BOTH ways of working out the problem ... it’s definitely important to use visual representations to ensure Bethany understands WHY the rule works – otherwise it’s just another mathematical rule

(Susan, discussion post, 1/4/2019)

The use of videos with her daughter asking questions was encouraging and helping us to see the problem from a teacher perspective of how to teach a student

(anonymous eVALUate comment)

Results: Discussion boards

Most responses occurred in weeks 1 and 2 (95, 82, 60, 57) with number of responses decreasing in weeks 10-12 (1, 2, 4, 7)

... because it wasn’t compulsory, I found as the workload got heavier and the semester went on, I kind of dropped back a bit on the participation (Lisa, interview)

Results: Discussion boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I received timely responses to my posts on MyLO</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would have posted more if posting was compulsory</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The discussion topics motivated me to post</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I responded to lecturer feedback/questions for my post</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instructor-created content in the form of short videos/multimedia

Most weeks featured one or more video excerpts which were used to demonstrate a particular concept/activity, serve as a motivator for promoting discussion, and/or link with classroom practice

Bethany wants to know, “Why do we invert and multiply when dividing fractions?”

Discussion and implications

• Be present and involved
  • Weekly instructor interviews and DBR encouraged reflection upon both student and instructor engagement

• Maximise the affordances of the online space
  • Provide a variety of resources and activities each week through multimedia applications and tools

• Provide opportunities for students to develop relationships and contribute meaningfully to the online learning environment
  • Use of synchronous and asynchronous tools, purposeful discussion forums, and interactive webinars
References


Good Practice in Online Teacher Education Guide

The checklist

Pre-semester: e.g.
- Am I gathering information about the student cohort to know who my learners will be?
- Am I sending a welcome email?
- Do the students know who I am and a bit about my teaching philosophy?

Early semester (weeks 1-3) e.g.
- What steps am I taking to get students to introduce themselves and get to know each other?
- Have I responded to or acknowledged every student in early discussion posts?
- Have I made contact with students who have not yet engaged?

Mid-semester: (weeks 4-10) e.g.
- How am I encouraging students to persist with their engagement?
- How am I using learner analytics to monitor engagement and adjust my teaching accordingly?
- How am I rewarding students who engage consistently?
- Have I invited feedback on unit design and adjusted accordingly?

Late semester (weeks 11-13) e.g.
- How am I ensuring that I maintain my presence and activity and continue to support student engagement?
- How am I ensuring my learning activities sustain student engagement until assignment and unit completion?
- Am I taking time to record problems that arose this year so I can adjust for next offering?

Discussion, Questions and Reflections