



The role of tutors in facilitating online student engagement

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This paper discusses the role of the tutor in developing an online learning community to promote student engagement for large online cohorts. Information overload on the discussion boards was addressed by separating students into streams of 150 – 200 students promoting greater student and staff engagement. A new feedback strategy was introduced to streamline the assignment-marking process and this feedback process has proved to be more socially engaging than traditional feedback via comments embedded within student assignments. The new feedback model involves commentary on assignments, which becomes a “conversation” with the student rather than a series of comments embedded within assignments. In addition, easier access to comments allows greater opportunity for moderation of marks by tutoring teams and for “feedforward” for subsequent assignments. The importance of the level of engagement and commitment to teaching of the tutoring staff has been made apparent by the serendipitous changes to the tutoring role.

Keywords: teaching teams, online learning, student engagement, learning community

The importance of student engagement

Student engagement has been defined by Macquarie University (2009) as ‘the extent or quality with which students are committed and actively involved in their learning’ (Macquarie University, p.1). This definition suggests student ownership of their learning by emphasising the student’s active involvement with the learning process, rather than emphasising interactions with other students, with academics or with institution. On the other hand, student engagement surveys such as American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE: 2009) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE: ACER, 2009) have an implicit definition of engagement embedded within their questionnaires. This implicit definition emphasises engagement with

peers, with staff, with the institution and with specific technologies or types of learning activities, thereby ensuring that responsibility for student engagement does not lie solely with the student.

Macquarie University also suggests that student engagement requires staff engagement, however little is said about the nature of staff engagement. Is staff engagement a matter of quality or quantity of intellectual interaction with students? Does staff engagement also involve being socially engaged with students? Do teaching staff need to be deeply engaged with the materials they are teaching, or with the teaching process itself? Or should staff engagement reflect a strong identification with the institution offering the course they are teaching? Staff engagement is as difficult to define clearly as student engagement, and neither term gives a clear indication of what exactly is being engaged with. Whatever the concept entails, it is generally agreed that successful students tend to be more engaged with their studies, and this is facilitated by engaged and enthusiastic teaching staff within a supportive learning environment (Bryson & Hand, 2007).

Student engagement in the online environment

As more university services go online, and many of the incoming cohort of students have grown up in the digital age, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the effects of online learning practices on student engagement (Krause & Coates, 2008). Online students are, in general, positive about their study, particularly with regards to its convenience in terms of independence of location and time (see LaBay & Comm, 2004 and Li & Irby, 2008 for a review of the literature). However, mode of delivery has a significant impact on attrition rates, in that online students are more likely to drop out than on-campus students (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Although some online students drop out of their courses for reasons specific to the individual student (e.g., work commitments, ill-health), Willging and Johnson (2004) report that i) feelings of isolation, ii) disconnectedness, and iii) technological problems are common explanations for the high attrition rates in online courses. In other words, many online students drop out from their study due to a lack of engagement with the online learning environment.

Online students also have higher expectations regarding interaction with teaching staff (LaBay & Comm, 2004; Li & Irby, 2008) than on-campus students, presumably because staff members tend to be more visible to them through the interface of the online course materials than their fellow students. Online study is, for the most part, a solitary pursuit, whereas on-campus students have greater opportunity to engage with their student peers in the course of their daily activities on campus than they do with the teaching staff. Online students, probably more so than on-campus students, need to be able to engage with their learning in an independent style, but it may be that overall academic engagement can be facilitated for this cohort by developing a greater sense of social engagement.

Online Learning Communities

Concerns have been raised that the technology comprising a university's learning management system ends up driving, rather than supporting, pedagogy (Deneen, 2010; Lane, 2009). Although this possibility is often cast in a negative light, learning technologies can also have positive effects on teaching practices and student engagement (Coates, James & Baldwin, 2005). With careful educational design, online courses are able to facilitate a sense of being part of a learning community despite the fact that students and staff are separated both physically and temporally (Rovai, 2002). Online activities, multimedia tools and discussion forums can increase emotional engagement in learning environment (Chih-Yan Sun & Rueda, 2011) and provide the necessary elements for a community of learners. Students who participate in a learning community are more engaged with their learning, which in turn is positively related to student outcomes and satisfaction (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Temporally synchronised chat sessions and asynchronous discussion forums are both important tools in student engagement (e.g., Chih-Yan Sun & Rueda, 2011).

Role of tutor in building a learning community

The Bachelor of Behavioural Studies (BBS) offered through OUA incorporates a major in psychology. Students are able to enrol in OUA programs without a recent history of previous study, a formal high school or equivalent entry score, or undertaking a pre-entry examination. Therefore, teaching staff must cater for large cohorts of students who are very diverse in their literacy, numeracy and computer skills, and may be undertaking the psychology program for a range of reasons. For example, some are upgrading their qualifications, some are enrolling in individual units out of interest, and some are testing the waters before registering into the online program or articulating to on-campus degree programs. Although many students in the BBS program are high achieving students showing independent or intense engagement styles, the majority of students fall into the passive or collaborative category, and there is a very high attrition rate (around 50%) compared with on campus studies (around 10%).

The BBS pedagogy has aimed from its very beginning to build the sense of being part of an online learning community. To give a sense that the teaching team are real people, photos are provided of all the tutors (selected by the tutors themselves) and brief video clips of a range of different lecturing staff. Tutoring staff are mostly Ph.D students, D.Psych students, and practicing psychologists, but also include on-campus teaching staff. The most important criteria are that tutors are passionate about teaching, are technically adept, and have valued the opportunity to work as part of a team that is the online “face” of the university.

The team teaching model within the introductory psychology unit evolved rapidly in response to the unexpectedly high growth in enrolment (Fleckhammer & Wise, 2010). Initially, the Blackboard website was set up to accommodate the whole of the student cohort and a general discussion board was monitored by members of the teaching staff. The discussion board comprised a number of forums with specific functions (General Discussion, Assignments, Technical Support, Social), and synchronised chat sessions were also conducted each week by each of the teaching staff. Students could attend any of the chat sessions. It quickly became evident that, with the increasing number of students, students and staff alike found the discussion forums difficult to navigate due to the volume of information. For example, the “Greetings” forum, for first week introductions had over 350 posts which students found overwhelming. In assignment-related forums, there were too many posts to read and questions were asked and answered multiple times, exacerbating the problem of information overload even further. For example, there were more than ten different threads called “Hypotheses” and these contained very similar questions and answers within them. Although the level of interaction appeared to be high based on the sheer number of contributions, the actual level of individual *disengagement* increased rapidly because many people could not keep up with the amount of traffic, creating an illusion that there was a conversation happening around them but that they were excluded from it (e.g., “I am a bit confused and maybe I am missing something due to being so overwhelmed”). Out of 2643 discussion forum posts on a discussion board servicing 323 students, almost 20% were written by the convenor in response to student posts. One other tutor contributed 84 responses, but the remaining 5 tutors only contributed between 1 and 16 posts. Disengagement occurred for students and tutors alike and many students turned to private email consultation with tutors rather than braving the alienating maelstrom of the discussion forums.

As student numbers were expected to keep rising, our major concern was to ensure that the teaching staff could facilitate engagement and establish an online presence to motivate student learning. We have established by trial and error that the optimal size for effective participation in discussion boards is between 150 and 250 students led by 3 to 4 tutors. Too many students results in too much information, and too few students fails to achieve a critical mass in terms of maintaining an ongoing level of interaction. Too many tutors can devolve responsibility too far so that no-one actually takes responsibility for maintaining a coherent staff presence, whereas too few tutors does not allow the tutoring team leeway to deal with the inevitable temporary absences due to illness or competing work/family commitments, particularly in the context of a year-long 4-study-period teaching cycle.

In the first study period to use tutor groups, there were a total of 3826 posts across 4 separate discussion boards, servicing between 150 – 200 students each. The same rate of staff student interaction was maintained as in the first iteration of the unit (23% of posts by staff), but in this iteration, half of the tutors posted more than 100 posts each and the convenor was not required to monitor discussion forums. Moreover, because of the separation of discussion boards, each stream of students were only confronted by 1000 posts during the course of the semester, rather than more than 2500 as per the first iteration.

The large online cohorts also necessitated the development of new process for assignment marking as described by Fleckhammer and Wise (2010). Rather than “correcting” student assignments (inserting comments that highlight specific errors, followed by a brief overall comment), tutors ‘talk’ directly to the student about their work, albeit asynchronously in the form of a written commentary of approximately 300 – 500 words. This is feedback strategy is more socially engaging than embedded comments, and, contrary to the original expectations of the authors, appears to enhance rather than dilute academic engagement. The increase in academic engagement is due to the need to comment at a higher level about content, rather than at the level of individual words and sentences, as tends to be the focus when comments are embedded into assignments. Academic engagement for teaching staff was unexpectedly increased through this method of providing feedback, due to the relative ease of access to comments. In order to read embedded comments, it is necessary to open each assignment document and read through it, which can be a time-consuming process akin to cross-marking the assignment. Comments are now visible directly from the gradebook so that, rather than cross-marking a subset of assignments, tutors can gain an overview of the level of feedback being offered by their peers across all assignments, and to see the range of interaction styles of their colleagues. Marks moderation is facilitated by being aware of types of comments led to what marks, and then cross-marking assignments targeted on the basis of specific feedback.

Not only does the use of tutor teams improve the tutor-student relationship and build on student engagement, but it builds the tutoring skills and overall academic development of individual tutors (staff engagement). The end result is that tutoring teams are now actively involved in setting the agenda for discussions, thereby improving their engagement with students. They are also responding to student inquiries about marking criteria, facilitating assignment preparation, and marking the assignments, thereby improving their engagement with the course content and the teaching process. This type of engagement gives rise a more involved relationship between tutors, and between tutors and individual students, which promotes academic engagement within a feedforward-feedback loop. Increased staff engagement can also lead to improved staff development, such that two of the online tutors without long-term academic career aspirations have now been motivated to convene their own online units. The emergence of tutoring skills can be seen in the increasing contribution of tutors to discussion forums, with experienced tutors tending to provide high levels of interaction (>100 posts per study period) and inexperienced tutors tending to interact less frequently (<30 posts per study period).

Concluding comments

The team tutoring approach has helped to build the level of student engagement among students completing the introductory unit, and there has been a decline in attrition (28% versus 20%), suggesting better engagement of the online cohort of students. Students are making more use of the online learning community fostered by the tutor teams, and the feedforward approach to learning has ensured that they are able to improve their level of academic engagement and acquire more effective study skills. There are also still a number of barriers to student engagement in line with those noted by Willging and Johnson (2004). For example, the implementation of the Blackboard learning management system used by the BBS program has technical limitations in terms of catering for large cohorts. Browser issues and technology challenges appear to be insurmountable for some students, and it can be difficult to address these issues remotely, particularly for under-engaged students.

We have established through our team teaching approach that the role of the online tutor is important in facilitating student engagement in the online environment. Although we have not improved overall student

academic performance, there has been a modest reduction in student attrition and we are confident that the level of student engagement has increased for the students who remain actively enrolled in the program through the increased use of discussion forums and tutor interaction.

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