



## How are you travelling? Facing retention head-on

**Carmen Schultz, Stephen Grono, Mike Franklin**

University of New England

Learner engagement and cultivating a sense of belonging is the primary challenge of providing distance, hybrid, and online modes of higher education (Parkes et al., 2015). In response to this need, we designed and embedded the ‘How are You Travelling?’ (HYT) block into 285 teaching sites over 6 years enabling student engagement. It provides a short side-by-side sequence of expressive emoji – from happy to tearful – in a high-visibility area of the course page within the LMS platform. When learners open the course, alongside the course content, they are greeted with a simple query: ‘How are you travelling?’.

The block is part of a holistic approach to engagement (Boulton et al., 2019), allowing for integration with broader university support services as appropriate to student needs. For students who are anxious or intimidated by directly contacting teachers via email, or publicly posting to discussion forums, the HYT block provides an approachable space for instigating open dialogue, increasing a sense of engagement (Hammill et al., 2020; Muzammil et al., 2020), and breaking cycles of distance, isolation and disconnect, with the overall goal to improve learner retention (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

In the HYT block, learners select an emoji indicating positive or negative affect and are taken to a form to optionally respond further. The HYT block draws on innovative uses of available functionality within the platform, without the need for custom plugins, including automatic alerts for teachers. The simplicity in design allows learners to reach out when in need or share when they are going well.

From a learning design perspective, the block is developed to:

- Provide a real-time and responsive support
- Act as a visual prompt to access support
- Indicate that students are valued within the online learning community
- Encourage and facilitate learner to instructor interaction (Hirumi, 2013)

Positive reactions allow the learner to communicate with the teacher about their positive learning journey, while the negative-coded emotions provide options to allow the teacher to reach out to them directly. There were 2,963 student interactions with the block (averaging 10.4 student interactions per site), of which 62.2% were positive-coded and 37.7% were negative-coded. Emoji was selected over written text as a more universal emotive language, allowing the learner to interpret the faces in a way that aligns to their own subjective experience (McCulloch, 2019). The intentional use of open-ended questions and emotion-based iconography can provide insight into the more “subjective aspect of the student experience” (Boulton et al., 2019, p. 1).

The HYT block and any follow-up conversations are not restricted by mode of study, so both on- and off-campus students can benefit. Being located directly in the course throughout the teaching duration, the HYT block allows for early intervention and timely feedback on issues, course content, and student affect, that are not readily available through traditional university feedback mechanisms, such as post-teaching surveys. Feedback from students on their progress allows teachers to engage with the learner and address issues on a personalised one-to-one basis, improving student engagement and anxiety (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*Results of 2022 HYT Block Teacher Feedback Survey*

Survey Questions	<i>n</i>	%
Contacted students as a result of student interaction with block	30	63.3
Initiated follow up action as result of contact with student	19	47.4
Perceived impact on student anxiety	27	
Positive		44.4
Neutral		55.6
Negative		0.0
Perceived impact on student engagement with teacher	27	
Positive		48.1
Neutral		51.9
Negative		0.0
Ease of Use	17	
Positive		41.2
Neutral		58.8
Negative		0.0
Would recommend tool	27	77.8

Keywords: Online learning, student engagement, student satisfaction, retention, wellbeing

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