

Why Are Students Not Engaging In Online Learning? A Lecturer's Reflection

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Background

This reflection is based on a course during semester one 2020-21. This is the semester many universities prepared for a fully online semester, as opposed to the quick transition to online teaching experienced in the first UK lockdown of March 2020. The course was Marketing Campaigns Development for third year students and the assessment consisted of a group presentation and individual report.

The learning and teaching practices used were based on transactional distance to overcome online student disengagement. Transactional distance refers to learners being geographically separated from other learners or the teacher (Bolliger and Halupa, 2018). Asynchronous practices were adopted and the following were integrated into the course;

- Developing a teacher presence (Muir et al., 2019)
- Social presence (Berry, 2019)
- Online videos to replace lectures
- Directed reading
- Posting homework answers on Moodle forums to replace classroom discussions

What is the problem?

Despite these adoptions, the author experienced a lack of student engagement with online learning. Moodle statistics showed limited interaction with the online content, students stopped/reduced answering homework on Moodle and group issues with member involvement became apparent towards the end of the semester. Further, the assessment results suggested a lack of engagement with class materials.

Why is this a problem?

Online learning will likely remain a core component as universities move towards hybrid teaching and learning practices post-pandemic. A better understanding of the student engagement in an online learning context will support building learning and teaching approaches suited to online and hybrid learning.

Why are students not engaging?

Reliance on teacher-managed activities

- Biggs and Tang (2011) categorised teaching/learning activities (TLA) into three; teacher-managed, peer-managed and self-managed activities.
- The TLAs used in this course fits into one category; teacher-managed. Even Moodle posts of homework, used to encourage social presence and capture the social interactions and discussion of seminars, were a teacher-managed activity.
- Lecturer has control and power in teacher-managed TLAs, creating a one-dimensional learning experience for students
- Too many teacher-controlled activities create a dominant teacher presence at expense of the other categories
- Therefore, students were not developing skills in self-management, information handling (developed using self-managed TLA), breadth of knowledge or self-insight (developed using peer-managed TLA)

Reliance on videos and further reading for most of the learning process

- This is an extension of teacher-managed activities (i.e. lectures and set texts)
- Appears to reduce peer-to-peer interaction. Perhaps these activities reduce motivation or create barriers to interaction.
- The course activities do not fully exploit the 4 types of student engagement needed for student learning (Dahleez et al, 2021);
 - Agentic (student involvement)
 - Behavioural (student response and act to information and tasks)
 - Emotional (student interest and enjoyment)
 - Cognitive (student ability to acquire and understand information)

Not considering student self-efficacy towards online learning

- Online self-efficacy refers to individual's perception of their ability to learn in an online environment (Lim et al, 2021) and self-efficacy is recognised as important for self-regulation and proficiency (Sun and Wang, 2020)
- I held an assumption that students can adapt to online learning due to their digital native status. However, this does not translate to student ability to learn online or student perception of learning online
- While students were comfortable with the technology, they did not appear to be comfortable with structuring their independent learning (i.e. self-managing)
- Further, online self-efficacy course design should consider "accessibility, interactivity, adaptability, knowledge acquisition, and ease of loading" (Wei and Chou, 2020 p56). The teacher-managed TLAs within the course appeared to negatively impact on aspects such as interactivity with peers, knowledge acquisition and ease of loading



How can engagement be improved?

A course design which uses all the TLAs

- Reduce reliance on videos and reading for knowledge acquisition (teacher-managed). Adding more peer-managed activities reduces the teacher-managed dominance of the current design and the peer interaction can support self-controlled TLAs, such as information handling, self-monitoring and independence (Biggs, 1999)

More active learning integrated

- This will address the different type of engagement needs, in particular agentic, behavioural and cognitive
- The collaborative nature of peer-managed TLAs naturally lend themselves for more active learning integration. Peer-to-peer interaction encourages more dialogue and supports flow of information and learning, which boosts engagement (Thompson et al., 2012)
- Active learning practices can include the Jigsaw method (a form of peer teaching) or spontaneous classroom collaboration. These activities support retention and application of subject knowledge (Allikemets and Vink, 2016)
- The student activity becomes an important factor for their learning outcome when using active learning (Michael and Modell, 2003). This further encourages student motivation

Building self-efficacy in online learning within the course

- Self-efficacy is recognised as important for independent learning (Sun and Wang, 2020) but students were lacking confidence in their ability to learn online. Developing self-efficacy in the course design can encourage more engagement with the course materials and activities

Further research suggestions

- This reflection is based on one course. There is scope to bring together the reflection and experiences of the teaching teams during the pandemic and use these insights to develop course designs
- Further research on developing student online self-efficacy would support hybrid teaching and learning practices
- More research on how course designs could be developed to build student self-efficacy will also be beneficial

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