

*Full Title - Emerging Insights from an Evaluative Study: exploring the impact of active Learning on academic practice in blended and online learning*

This reflection is based on the initial key finding from a research study exploring the impact of Active Learning on Academic Practice in Blended and Online Learning. The findings are based on a review of literature in the area of active learning and blended and online learning as well as analysis of staff interviews and a student survey. From the thematic analysis of the staff and student data to date, initial key findings have emerged.

### **Online Learning Should Incorporate Student-Centred Active Learning Approaches Aligned to Student Engagement**

There are many factors that need to be considered when designing and teaching online. Multiple variables will impact on the design choices around how the course is taught. The types of content/learning material to be developed, the types of in-class activities that can/should be implemented and the assessment types that are selected will be unique to each programme. However, one consistency should be that designing blended and online programmes needs to begin with a student-centred approach. The analysis of the staff interview data reflected many challenges for getting students to actively participate in online class. This void impacted on staff being able to gauge students' level of understanding of the material covered and the effectiveness of the teaching. Staff found it was difficult to replicate the interaction and engagement from a face-to-face class in the online class.

Perceived limitations around what can/cannot be achieved in the online space has the potential to hinder the student's learning. Staff refer to the lack of social engagement from students, how students were shy and quiet in the main online class and this was challenging for them. Only through structured activities such as breakout room or discussion forums staff felt that student could connect with their peers and engage. This issue is commonly identified in the literature around online learning. Conrad and Donaldson (2012) emphasis that online engagement is related to "participation and interaction".

Groccia notes that regardless of a class being delivered in a face to face or online it is *"still an interactive community event whose success rests upon the instructor's ability to create a sense of presence and engage students in the learning process"* (Groccia, 2018).

The key to facilitating learning in this space is recognising the importance of student engagement online. Embedding active learning throughout the coursework that aligns to the different types of engagement helps to prevent students missing out on a full learning experience. The five types of engagement identified by Redmond show the different aspects of the engagement that must be nurtured (Redmond et al, 2018).

### **Developing the Teaching and Student Relationship for Online Learning Through Pedagogies of Care and Digital Empathy**

The study identified the need for staff to further explore how to incorporate digital empathy into their online pedagogical practice. Friesem defines digital empathy as the *"cognitive and emotional ability to be reflective and socially responsible while strategically using digital media"* (Friesem, 2016). The data from the staff interviews highlights the concerns that staff have around staying connected with students. Most staff said they had spent much more time outside of class time to answer email queries and to give follow up or one-to-one sessions. Staff were worried and concerned about students not being able to access the content and keeping up with the coursework. The fear of students falling behind resulted in staff having to check on them on an individual level.

Staff were mindful that certain approaches for communicating with students were not beneficial e.g. where students did not feel comfortable turning on their cameras or talking. Staff indicated that not all students felt included, they were isolated and disconnected from peers. Connecting with students and building the teacher-student relationship can help students to engage. Burke et al's (2021) recognise the importance of pedagogies of care for *"effective and engaging online pedagogy"*.

The results from this study indicate that 50% of students would like to see some element of blended learning as part of their programme. This research will aim to identify suitable approaches for helping staff to develop digital empathy in the online classroom.

### **Managing Expectations and Preparing Students for Learning Online**

Managing different cohorts of students in an online space is important to ensure the required group dynamics are instilled in the online class. The Staff interview data found staff felt that group dynamics will have an impact of the learning experience. This will impact on how the group engage and participate or if they will passively attend classes. Preparing students to interact with online activities such as group activities, discussion forums, collaborative spaces can help them to gain the most from these activities. The need to provide clear communication channels and space for students to discuss with their peers and with staff is key for building behavioural engagement in the online class.

The student survey revealed that for students their main priority is focused on doing well in assignments, completing coursework and being engaged. Activities such as participating in groupwork, completing online activities and getting to know others in the class were selected as least characteristic of students. Highlighting the importance of these activities to the students should give them a better understanding of why it is important to participate in the overall learning and class experience.

Conole's 7C's of Learning Design Model highlights the importance of clear and consistent communication for students (Conole, Fill, 2005). The need for clarity around online tasks is evident also in Gilly Salmon's E-tivity Framework (Salmon, 2009) and the importance of informing students of the purpose of any online tasks and activities.

### **Consistent Institutional Support and Guidance for Staff teaching Blended and Online**

The majority of staff felt that delivering online took a lot more time. Additional time communicating to students was also noted by staff and this has impacted on their overall work life balance. Staff are spending a lot more time preparing their online classes. Some compared the face to face to the online space and felt they could not replicate how they teach in a face to face class in an online class. A lack of confidence with the range of applications and tools that could be implemented was common, with many feeling overwhelmed when first teaching online. Staff were not as comfortable improvising or moving away from the slides being covered. Improvising and doing on the spot group activities were not as easy to complete and the online class had to be more structured with everything setup and ready to go before class started.

The results show a lack of certainty when designing lesson plans and assessment strategies for online classes. The varying level of engagement within certain activities highlights the issue that the composition and focus of the activity must be tailored towards the individual group.

An increase in work, duty and responsibility was noted by many staff who mentioned that this led to an increase in stress and anxiety with their duty as a lecturer. The large increase in communication with students outside of class time stresses the need for resources and guidance for teaching online and how best to manage expectations for both staff and students. There is a need for guidance for structuring coursework within online applications, and the most appropriate use of certain tools and applications.

Support should be given to staff new to blended and online learning to help them balance a new teaching mode (Blended/Online). Staff need to be cognisant of ensuring students are engaged in the learning, the well-being of students is balanced and developing the student teaching relationship. These demands will vary from class to class but will weigh heavily on a lecturer and supports should be put in place to avoid burnout of staff. Support is essential to ensure there is a consistent level of integrity on new blended and online programmes going forward.

### **References**

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