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Providing Business school students with online social networking opportunities during remote learning

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The challenge

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UK universities have had to move teaching online. The absence of in-person teaching means that students have had far less opportunity to socialise with each other on campus. This can have adverse impacts on students' emotional well-being and engagement in their studies (Margalit, 2010). The situation appears particularly challenging to new students, because they are new to the environment and have had little opportunity to get to know others in person. I decided to provide students with social networking opportunities during online classes, aiming to help them adapt to interacting, and staying connected, with their virtual learning communities (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999).

My response

In the second semester (January–May 2021), I experimented with the use of online interactive quizzes as an ice-breaker activity on a postgraduate module. I gained the idea from the study published by Elliott (2020). The module had 40 students, and 20 of them were new January starters. I also offered them social interaction time (15 minutes during seminars on a weekly basis) throughout the semester. The rationale was to encourage the social aspect of online learning by allowing students to get to know their fellow students, get used to virtual collaboration, and remain socially interactive online. The solutions also aimed to help the

newcomers self-select their group members, as students on the module needed to complete a group work assessment.

Virtual icebreaker activity

The quiz was hosted on Microsoft (MS) Teams and took place during the first week of the seminar. I chose to use Mentimeter to design the quiz, because it is an institutionally supported software application, and provides a range of affordances. For example, it allows unlimited quiz takers and enabled me to set up leader boards for individual questions and the entire quiz, which helped engage students and make the quiz more interesting. I was also able to design different types of questions using the built-in features. In addition, students could easily access the quiz using their mobile phones.

The 25 questions quiz lasted around 1 hour and a half and included general knowledge and Business Information Technology (BIT) related questions, as BIT was a key focus of the module. The former aimed at motiving newcomer contribution by enabling them to have some fun in their online classroom (Hurst, Wallace and Nixon, 2013). Meanwhile, students were encouraged to practise online peer learning. Since learning is considered a social process (Vygotsky, 1978), they were asked to introduce each other and discuss and work out the answers together.

All students were randomly allocated into small breakout rooms and presented with one question at a time. The answer was then entered by one representative. Students' feedback suggests that the quiz really helped them to meet others on the module and to break down social barriers: as a new student reported, 'the quiz was fun, enjoyable and helpful!' An existing student also commented 'I wish other tutors were doing something similar'. Through this practice, I gained valuable experience of supporting students' social development in online learning, and of designing and running quizzes using Mentimeter.

Social interaction time during seminars

During seminars, I randomly assigned students to their breakout rooms to allow them to speak with different students. Each room had a maximum of three students, with the aim of easing the pressure on them and making it easier for them to switch their camera on when having conversations. I also suggested some ice-breaker questions, such as 'any recommendations for films on Netflix?' In order to create a more relaxing environment, I did not enter the breakout rooms, but let students know that I was available if they needed me to join their discussion. This is because tutors' social and facilitatory presence is considered essential in online learning (Rapanta et al., 2020). The extra social bonding time was also well received, and the students appreciated the fact that I made the effort to help them with their social connections and interactions. One student commented: 'I often feel lonely…It is nice to have a casual chat with others'.

My recommendations

Based upon the discussions above, it is very important for universities to adopt a learner centred approach, encouraging and assisting collaborative learning to keep students engaged in online learning (Bandura, 1977; Rayens and Ellis, 2018). Reflecting on my personal experience, students' social needs should be considered as an important component of the learning environment, if a similar situation arises in future. Academic staff, for example, should consider embedding collaborative activities, such as virtual classroom games into online classes. These are easy to design and run and have proven beneficial in helping reduce nervousness and increase online student engagement (Ernest et al., 2013).

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