

The Role of Technology and Online Learning in Higher Education

Engaging with postgraduate students online



Ann Marcus-Quinn
Lecturer at University
of Limerick

This article offers ideas on how to engage with online students on a taught MA programme. In the wake of Covid-19, online engagement has become a critical part of online delivery and facilitation, with many third-level courses suddenly having to adapt to an online offering.

Online engagement through content

This article focuses on postgraduate engagement. What works for postgraduate students may not necessarily work as well with undergraduate students, and what works with one faculty may not work with another. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

There are many ways to engage postgraduate students online, including the provision of high-quality digital learning resources, made available through a virtual learning environment (VLE), which can be used in a personalised manner. A growing body of research identifies how students engage in online learning and their use of mobile devices to access learning resources. Many published studies indicate that students regularly access a variety of materials, in various ways, through mobile devices (Marcus-Quinn and Cleary, 2015).

During the rapid move to online teaching in March 2020, many faculty members considered offering video content to students. While there are advantages to using video, sometimes an audio podcast is the better choice for both faculty and students. For faculty, the benefits of audio include less-onerous production values compared to what is required to produce good video content. For students, the benefits include more freedom in where and how they can listen, and many students with limited connectivity may find it easier to download a small audio file than to live-stream a lecture.

Asynchronous and synchronous engagement

Online engagement can take many forms, including asynchronous and synchronous engagement using online discussion and live chat in an institutional VLE. What is meant by engagement? Trowler (2003) defines student engagement as being concerned with the interaction 'between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the

learning outcomes and development of students and the performance and reputation of the institution'. Trowler's definition places the responsibility for engagement on students, teachers, and institutions and sees positive engagement translating into better learning outcomes for the students and a better reputation and possibly a better ranking for the institution.

The last decade has seen an increase in the literature highlighting the importance of students' online engagement. Chen et al. (2010) note:

students who utilize the Web and Internet technologies in their learning tend to score higher in the traditional student engagement measures (e.g. level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment), they also are more likely to make use of deep approaches of learning like higher order thinking, reflective learning, and integrative learning in their study and they reported higher gains in general education, practical competence, and personal and social development.

We are in a golden age of online resources, but we must be cognisant of what we are expecting of students, and we must recognise that students have many demands on their time outside of study.

Learning analytics and tracking engagement

Learning analytics has enabled faculty to track student activity in VLEs. But this raises the question of whether we should. While there may be merit in tracking some aspects of online activity, it can also be problematic. Research by Osborne et al. (2018) concluded that 'supporting and assessing students in such a forum remains contentious'. Nevertheless, online engagement – particularly for distance and online students – does make a difference. In a 2008 study, Campbell et al. found: 'Online discussions are associated with at least as good results as face-to-face seminar discussions in a web-based postgraduate research methods course. This study also found that an increased use of online resources, including web sites and discussion boards, is associated with higher student achievement.'

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Online engagement is about more than merely accessing course materials. Student participation in online asynchronous discussions and synchronous chat sessions can be hugely beneficial, but what happens when some students do not want to, or cannot, engage in these activities? Some research suggests awarding marks for these activities. But tracking and assessing online engagement is complex, and developing a grading rubric can be challenging. There are many external factors to be considered. Osborne et al. (2018) note: 'Many factors impacted on student interaction ... including a lack of time due to paid work and other coursework and assessments.'

In Ireland, connectivity adds another layer of difficulty to building in assessed participation in online discussion. There have been several surveys over the past year or so on Irish people's satisfaction with broadband. Many reported a high level of dissatisfaction with the level of connectivity. It is also important to note that many postgraduate students have to balance

caring duties. Kahu (2013) highlights the ‘lifeload’ that many distance and online students have to juggle alongside their studies. This was particularly evident during the school closures associated with Covid-19 in 2020. It would have been difficult for many to engage and participate in meaningful online discussion. Likewise, many faculty members have had to juggle caring responsibilities with their online tasks. We must therefore be realistic in our expectation of online student participation.

Challenges of online engagement

In the midst of such challenges, what can we do to try to engage our students online?

The traditional classroom content needs to be adapted, but how? Podcasts can work very well. Typically, a 45-minute lecture can become a 15- or 20-minute podcast after a heavy edit. Many lecturers report that recording a live lecture does not work well. Discourse markers which sound fine in a physical classroom with the content of space and other props do not work so well in a podcast. Slight pauses in a class, made for emphasis or to give students a few moments to reflect, seem much longer in a podcast.

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Other strategies include one-on-one learning conferences. Engaging students online through targeted feedback can work quite well in a discussion forum or chat session. Audio feedback is another option that can be used to deliver feedback quickly to students. Introducing students to a weekly discussion topic early in the semester can foster a culture in the class group for students to engage in discussion with their peers. As the academic year progresses and the cohort get to know one another a little better, many faculty notice the discussion forum getting more traffic.

Necessary supports for online engagement

A number of supports are necessary for successful online engagement. Many third-level institutions do not yet have a comprehensive set of guidelines for using virtual learning environments. A common set of guidelines would be really useful, because we often expect that students will behave in a certain manner when using online discussion and chat, and they may not. This can create problems in the group dynamic.

It is important to be mindful that not all students will have the same academic ambition, so they will not all contribute equally. Likewise, an enthusiastic cohort will engage meaningfully from the outset, whereas some groups may not move beyond a superficial level.

Scalability is another key issue in online engagement. A synchronous discussion or chat with thirty students can be managed without too much trouble. But if the class is much bigger than this, it becomes almost impossible to monitor effectively, and a different approach is required. There is a heavy workload involved in setting up, monitoring, and assessing online discussions, but it is possible to design and structure them.

Conclusion

With Covid-19 and the pivot to online, there is no doubt that online programmes will be necessary for the foreseeable future. It is critical that we learn from what works and, more importantly, what has not. Good communication with students is imperative if a positive online space is to be created and nurtured. Postgraduate students are autonomous and self-regulated, and it is important that they be allowed to contribute to this space without too much regulation – but there must be rules.

Talking with colleagues is also necessary so that students have a clear picture of what they can expect from their online space. This is especially important if you are going to try to assess the online discussion or chat. If students are also having to engage with assessed online e-tivities, they may well be over-burdened at certain points in the semester.

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“When it comes to eLearning, content means everything. If eLearning content is not masterfully designed, all the rest will just go down the drain.”

– Christopher Pappas