Play like a team in Teams

How students engage with online social learning

As the global pandemic increasingly keeps students away from classrooms, school and university-level teaching has had to adapt to online environments. It is now more important than ever that we understand how students can engage with each other. Associate Professor Sarah Prestridge from Griffith University, Australia, studied how students interact with each other online. Her findings inform the design of more effective online courses.

To address this, Dr Sarah Prestridge, Associate Professor at the School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Australia, and online education specialist Dr Deriese Cox, conducted a study designed to improve our understanding of student engagement in social online learning environments, focusing on students’ social engagement using Microsoft Teams (Teams).

The course taught students about information and communication technologies in education, through two, six-week modules. The first module was conducted in person but used Teams for some tasks within tutorials. The second module was entirely online and featured several topics that students worked through at their own pace. Student grades were not linked to whether or how they participated in Teams.

Students were expected to use Teams to share their tasks and knowledge with peers, including reflecting on course content, generating mind maps, and sharing ideas. Rather than facilitating, the teachers played a minor role, encouraging student-led discussions, observations, and statements. Overall, 68.5% of students chose to use Teams in some way in Module 1, as they became more familiar with the platform’s chat-based environment, while in the wholly online Module 2, 97.2% of students actively engaged through Teams.

ONLINE TEACHING

Teaching online requires more than just knowing how to use technology or transferring materials to an online platform: it demands new ways of teaching and engaging with students. It also requires that teachers have the pedagogical skills to deliver the course in a student-centred way. However, recent research has suggested that many teachers lack the skills and knowledge to design student-centred teaching methods, in part, because they lack knowledge about how students actually engage with online tools for learning.

SOCIAL LEARNING

The most effective method for learning is a student-centred approach with an emphasis on online cognitive-social learning engagement through collaboration with peers. One of the leading models to understand teaching and student engagement suggests that social collaboration is one of the most important elements of the teaching experience. Students themselves have suggested that the social aspects of learning, such as discussion forums, are important to improve skills, clarify knowledge, or to build on an answer to a question.

However, while there are currently many teacher-made video lessons and instruction sessions on synchronous platforms like Zoom, Skype, and Teams, there are relatively few online social learning activities that engage students in the learning process. Getting students to co-create, co-construct, and co-communicate with others, for example, is known to be an effective learning process, but is more rarely seen online.

One reason for this is that we don’t understand enough about how students can get an effective online social learning experience. Research has found that, just as in the classroom, different types of learners engage differently with online teaching materials; while some students proactively collaborate with others, others tend to sit on the sidelines. But while learning communities have long been understood as essential for online learning, previous studies have concluded that not enough students have the confidence and skills to create such a community. This has led to a call to move away from teacher-centric models of delivering online courses, towards activities designed to specifically increase student-to-student engagement. To achieve this, we need a much clearer understanding of different types of online learning designs and how students engage collaboratively with each other online.

TRIALLING THE ONLINE PLATFORM

Prestridge and Cox designed their study around an undergraduate course on which they were teaching, which had 181 students across three campuses. At that time (2019), Teams – an online platform that enables video, file sharing, and chat-based interactions – was being trialled as a new teaching platform. The researchers’ study focused on chat-based student interactions on Teams.

Prestridge and Cox analyse discussions on Teams chat forums.

Sarah Prestridge’s findings will inform the design of more effective online courses.
PLAYING LIKE A TEAM IN TEAMS

Prestridge and Cox analysed the student discussions on the Teams chat forums, to categorise the posts and identify patterns. They studied the 281 posts from Module 1, and each of the 3,574 individual posts, and the interactions between them, from Module 2. The researchers identified three themes of student engagement from Module 1: background participation, which included posts about the course content or agreeing with another student’s post; engaging with content, which involved discussing and reflecting on the course content; and generating content, which involved proactively locating digital tools for the assessment tasks.

From the Module 2 posts and their interactions, Prestridge and Cox identified six categories of engagements of different complexity: lurk, superficial, and task, represented lower-level cognitive complexity, and involved students simply liking/agreeing with others, using emojis and completing assigned tasks; while respond, expand, and create, represented greater cognitive complexity, such as engaging in active discussions about the course content. Unlike lurk, superficial and task, where students essentially engaged for themselves (as they might in teacher-centred methods), students in respond, expand, and create categories engaged with each other to create a community of inquiry in which they acted to extend each other’s thinking: in the researchers’ words, they ‘played like a team in Teams’.

A TYPOLOGY OF ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

The researchers then looked again to determine the complexity and intensity of each of the posts. From this analysis they created a new typology of cognitive social engagement, of four different learner profiles:

- **Bench Sitter** – a student who does not post frequently or with high complexity, liking or agreeing but not contributing new information.
- **Hustler** – students who frequently like or agree but not contributing.
- **Striker** – students who may not engage often, but when they do their post is often complex and thought-provoking.
- **Champion** – students who explore the course content more deeply through frequent and complex posts, sharing their own ideas, asking questions and supporting their peers. Champions championed others with the chat stream, expanding upon ideas.

Despite the limited cohort studied, Prestridge and Cox believe these student profiles can be useful for designing online courses and evaluating different teaching interventions, enabling teachers to understand the differences between the highly visible hustler student and the less visible but more complex contributions of the striker, for example, or understanding how to enable a bench sitter to become a champion (though they emphasise the need for further research to understand whether moving students towards different engagement types in this way would improve their learning outcomes or the nature of learning communities).

The researchers highlight that the student profiles they identified do not reflect previous studies’ findings that only a small percentage of students demonstrate complex learning cognition, as they found that 40% of the students – who made up the champions and strikers – demonstrated complex engagement. Contrary to the idea that students’ capabilities determine the complexity of their engagements, this more nuanced understanding suggests that, when the appropriate collaborative space is provided, students make a choice about whether and how to engage. As in all environments, students may choose to engage for a number of reasons. These profiles can provide students with insight into how they are behaving and give teachers the language to talk about student engagement, including with the students themselves.

Some students engaged with each other to create a community of inquiry in which they acted to extend each other’s thinking.

The researchers suggested that using these profiles as a foundation for further research could provide a better understanding of effective online course design and teaching methods, as well as understanding what aspects of course design can influence student engagement.

Their findings could be particularly useful for school and university teachers, to facilitate effective online collaboration between students. Such information will continue to be important post-COVID-19 pandemic as students still need to engage in more online learning opportunities.

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**Behind the Research**

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**References**


**Personal Response**

“The issue here is more on the process which is as important as focusing on academic outcome. If we can improve the online learning process then we can improve learner academic outcome. This research has highlighted that designing a community-oriented discussion forum leads to greater student cognitive-social learning agency. It has also highlighted that a step forward would be to build students’ metacognition by making them aware of the choices they are making and the learning actions taking place.”

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**Bio**

Sarah Prestridge is the 2020 Top Scholarly Researcher in Teaching in Teacher Education in Australia. Her passion for transforming learning through digital technologies has taken her from classroom teacher to university researcher. She has developed strong theoretical frameworks that conceptualise ‘best practice’ with digital learning and teaching, and theorised key principles of transformative Professional Development.

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**Collaborators**

Dr Deniese Cox (co-author)