

Student Engagement: Lessons from COVID Times

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Author Note

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Abstract

This research is a follow-up to our research on student engagement from 2020 which found students who took asynchronous online courses during COVID were somewhat more engaged than their counterparts who took in-person and synchronous online courses. For this research, 9 faculty members were interviewed about the pedagogical tools and techniques they used to encourage student engagement in their courses during COVID classes (online, face-to-face, asynchronous, etc.).

Keywords: student engagement, online learning, online teaching, COVID

Introduction

This research is an extension of research we conducted on student engagement which we began in the fall of 2020 at Mount Allison University, a small liberal arts university in rural New Brunswick, Canada. We were interested in exploring course delivery modality and student engagement and if differences would be observed or not.

We defined student engagement in two ways, behavioural and affective engagement. Behavioural engagement we understand as a measure of classroom behaviours, including involvement in learning and participation in classroom activities (Fredricks, Paris, & Blumenfeld, 2004) and effective engagement as a measure of how students feel about their classes (Finn, 1993; Lee, 2014). We found no difference in engagement across our seven modalities with the exception of online asynchronous courses which were slightly more engaging.

We were interested in this follow up research to investigate what faculty did to make their courses more engaging. We therefore interviewed faculty to determine what tools and strategies they deployed to encourage student engagement, particularly in online environments.

Research Design and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore and understand how faculty created and produced engaging activities and learning in their classes during COVID 19. Qualitative methods were chosen to obtain deep understandings into the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of participants and their pedagogical choices.

Our research assumed an interpretivist approach, recognizing the subjective nature of human experiences while also understanding that objectivity is a social construct. This model guided the exploration of meanings and the understanding of the social context surrounding the interviews on engagement and pedagogy.

Participants were selected purposefully based on section one of our research, i.e., the faculty selected were those who participated in our research exploring student engagement which included student surveys and pre-course interviews. Interviews for the second section of our research occurred after course were completed (Winter, 2021).

A total of nine participants took part in the study. We did not collect demographic information due to privacy issues. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Mount Allison University.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. An interview guide, developed based on the research questions and literature review, was used to ensure consistency across interviews. Interviews were automatically transcribed and then corrected after collection. Participants were contacted via email and informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews. Interviews were video recorded with participants' consent.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis using QDA Miner Lite, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were generated, patterns were identified, and themes were developed to capture the essence of participants' experiences and perspectives. Significant and important data was identified outside of themes and became a central component of the research in terms of challenges and positives the faculty identified.

The study received ethical approval by Mount Allison University's Research Ethics Board. Participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Questions

Our interview questions for our semi-structured interviews were as follows:

- What pedagogical tools can we use that encourage engagement and what are their advantages/disadvantages?
- How do we incorporate engaging activities into our classes?
- How do we measure and assess engagement?
- How do we judge different methods of engaging students?

Results

Our thematic analysis resulted in a series of pedagogical tools faculty identified and used in their teaching. For brevity, they are identified as follows:

- Frequent evaluation with immediate feedback

- Low stakes online quizzes
- Low stakes skills drills
- Teach less so students can learn more
- A move from instructivism to active learning
- Being attentive to the power imbalance between students, and between student and faculty member
- Completing modules sequentially
- An understanding that students learning in different ways
- A focus on higher order rather than rote learning
- A recognition of the social nature of students/people
- Class size impacts engagement (smaller classes have more engagement)
- Using an informal approach to teaching helps with engagement
- Smaller “chunks” of content are better
- Evaluation in stages instead of cumulatively
- Focus on skills and competencies
- Collaboration in-class encourages attendance and participation
- Interactive online lectures with H5P are more engaging.

Some of the challenges faculty encountered are not particularly surprising for most faculty teaching through COVID. Again, for brevity, we will list them below:

- “It takes time to prepare” & you need technical skills to offer asynchronous online course
- Teaching online and dealing with technology is stressful
- We need to consider the goal and purposes of evaluation
- You can’t be everything for everyone as it is too stressful
- You need to “shake it up” and encourage students to figure out best way to learn
- Capacity to “connect ideas” was not ideal especially for “average students when they were online”
- Students miss a lot of social skills and bonding if they have been learning exclusively online
- There is a lot of non-verbal communication in-person
- A “number of students are resistant to online learning”
- “Interacting” with students is important and it is hard when students don’t/can’t turn on their cameras.

Faculty identified a number of benefits and positives in teaching within the context of COVID and online. These are as follows:

- “The whole pandemic experience has made me think more deeply about pedagogy.”
- We think more now about accessibility, UDL (universal design for learning), EDID (equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization) and managing faculty/student stress
- We are more aware of learning style since we were “pushed to the edge”

- There is a “socialness” to learning & it is important that students to engage with each other to “see others engaging”
- “(Our) institution exists because of the immersive experience”
- Technology has offered useful opportunities and instructors seem to have become more comfortable and appreciative of it
- Some students find online courses convenient, but these tend to be more self-motivated
- We have learned “what we love” and what we “don’t want to do again “
- “I’m going to spend more time on collaborative and group work in the classroom” (after teaching online)
- It is OK to “take really big risks with our courses to make it work for the students”.

Conclusion

COVID certainly presented challenges in teaching, but also some significant benefits. The skills barrier, i.e., not knowing the technology, as well as, unfamiliarity with best practices for online teaching posed substantial concern and stress for faculty as we moved to online learning. However, reflecting deeply on one’s pedagogy and thinking more about accessibility, UDL, EDI and decolonization, are important to inclusive post-secondary education and were considered important lessons and values to embrace. This may be in contrast to many preconceived notions regarding online teaching but also the negative impact of COVID.

References

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