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How do we build effective online student communities?

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How do we build effective online student communities?

The rapid switch to online modes of delivery in many institutions has brought with it a myriad of challenges for engineering programme delivery, including issues around effective technologies, digital access, and delivery of hands-on project and laboratory activities.

Reflection on these issues after a full semester of online teaching at our institution suggests that despite initial difficulties, both educators and students have adapted well to online delivery of content, and indeed certain aspects such as video content and online quizzes have been very well received by students. However, significant challenges remain in creating effective social structures and peer groups which are vital for student learning, mental health and wellbeing. Online delivery remains 'distant' (Ní She, *et al* 2019), not only is there a degree of separation between the educator and student but the student is also separated from their peers. Lui *et al* (2007) highlighted how online modes of delivery can lead to a sense of student isolation. To overcome this, it is important to embed opportunities and activities for engagement. Some activities within the school such as an ongoing reflective journal activity for Mathematics, involving online peer group feedback sessions, have been generally well received: *"I have thoroughly enjoyed being part of my group...it's been refreshing to be able to talk to people on my course and not just be watching lectures all day. They've been super helpful with any problems I've had."* However, managing these has been technically challenging and time intensive, and issues with engagement remain.

After a full academic year of teaching online, drawing on the experiences from our own School, the aim is that this workshop will be a starting point for collating best practices in building engaging online communities, with potential opportunity for further collaboration between workshop participants across various institutions. The workshop will provide opportunities for participants to share experiences/methods and both motivate and give confidence to those who want to try new forms of online engagement with their students.

Intended learning outcomes:

- Benefit from shared discussion of prior experiences both positive and negative.
- Gain ideas and methodologies for building online learning communities.
- Acquire understanding of how methods could be applied within own teaching context.
- Develop motivation and confidence to try new approaches.
- Gain access to a support network of peers building online communities within engineering education.

This workshop is for anyone who wants to share their experience of trying to develop an online student community. We want to hear the good, the bad and the ugly! It will also be an opportunity for those who are new to online delivery and are looking for ideas.

In this workshop we would like to explore the following:

1. Creating: How do we put structures in place that will encourage students to engage. How does it become a natural part of the learning environment? How can we encourage students to build online communities?
2. Methods: How can technology be used to facilitate this? What activities can we build into our programmes that embed social interaction? How does the group size, dynamic and environment affect the approaches taken - Blended vs Online vs In-person? What pedagogical

methods are key? How do we switch traditional group project and hands-on activities to an online format?

3. Evaluation: How do we evaluate the effectiveness of the structures that have been put in place?

A short introduction will be given at the start of the workshop to outline the structure and provide context to the activities that will be used. A poll will be carried out to determine the experiences within the group. The workshop will then be facilitated using virtual breakout rooms with participants split into groups to discuss the various topics outlined above. Depending on group size, this environment provides the flexibility to either assign participants randomly to a group or allow them to select which topic they would like to focus on. Responses and contributions from each session will be gathered using an electronic collaboration platform such as Padlet. This enables a large number of participants to easily engage not only with the workshop facilitator but with each other. Using the platform gives the participants a choice of several of methods of interaction; oral, post comments or attachment of documents they would like to share. A summary of each area will be created and disseminated back to the wider group at the end of the session. Following the conference, the information gathered within the workshop will be disseminated via the conference proceedings.

With blended learning at the forefront of engineering education now more than ever, and students engaging predominantly via online both academically and socially, it is vital that we continue to evolve our methods of engagement via online platforms. Not only will this benefit students from a learning perspective it will help facilitate healthy relationships with peers in both a social and professional capacity. This in turn will help students to develop essential skills that will be beneficial in the workplace. Given the likely longer-term impact of changes in professional working environments, which were driven by Covid-19 pandemic, it is important that students gain experiences of effectively interacting remotely and building relationships with colleagues at all levels as this is likely to be a core element of the workplace of the future.

KEYWORDS

Building online communities, online engagement, online learning

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