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Improving Engagement through Real-Time Communication Supported by Slack

*“In education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education”
(Partnership, 2016).*

Introduction

Students leave courses or quit university for many reasons. Some of these may include a lack of belonging, difficulty with the subject matter, and problems communicating their learning needs. Communication with and for students in the first year of university is vital. It is central to them developing a community and seeking support at crucial assessment points from both staff and other students.

This presentation examines a pilot research project funded by the Teaching and Learning Innovation Centre, at the University of Northampton. The project used the real-time asynchronous communications tool, Slack to address issues of retention and student satisfaction. This project differs from others due to the nature of the subject matter, the large class size and the Active Blended Learning (ABL) methods used. This approach has had an enormous impact on our student’s sense of belonging, satisfaction, module retention and achievement. We share our results and methods used in this project as well as the potential pitfalls when implementing such an approach.

Evaluation/Reflection:

In this presentation we present a study (N=120) on the impact of *Slack* as a communication tool within a core computer science module at the University of Northampton. Evaluation has been carried out using student feedback and interviews, focus groups, and analytics. Additional data gathering is currently underway as the project ends in May 2018. The team has two projects in tandem the one outlined above as well as a smaller study carried out by a student grant recipient on the student perspective of communication in the department. We continue to reflect upon the impact of this technology/ research with the following cohorts:

Staff: Highlighting potential issues or struggling students early on. May offer time efficiencies and fewer email issues.

Students: Increased participation and engagement through building stronger communities of practice.

University: Increased student satisfaction, achievement and retention for the module and course.

Future: Ability to roll out this approach to other modules in computing (as appropriate), and potentially other modules in the university where communication and community are central to learning strategies.

We are also examining a number of 'threshold' concepts students learn and need to master on the target module; web development. A threshold concept is one that is, in computer programming that requires complex cognitive ability. Our team has used Slack to create 'channels' around several threshold concepts to allow focus for deep learning. Channels allow small asynchronous discussion groups to form to extend and support students who may be struggling or for those who are demonstrating advanced skills.

This project has demonstrated that using asynchronous communication tools enhances both the experience of the student and the lecturing staff. The whole class worked together by supporting each other thereby building an improved student experience and engagement on both the target and other modules where students took up the use particularly where teamwork was involved.

“Every student that drops out of their higher education course is a loss: a loss to their university or college, a loss to the future economy and, above all, a loss to that individual”
[\(Thomas et al. 2017\)](#) .

References:

Partnership, G. S. (2013) *Student Engagement Definition* [Online]. Available at <https://www.edglossary.org/student-engagement/> (Accessed 26 March 2018).

Thomas, L., Hill, M., O', J., Professor, M., Yorke, M. (2017) Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change What Works? Student Retention & Success programme Final Report.

Resources:

Slack App