The use of virtual drop-in sessions during Covid-19 as a means to increase engagement with learning development

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The challenge

The Learning Development (LD) team, located within a post-92 university, is a small research-active group of academics with an extensive range of teaching and learning experience. Our student-centred approach aims to develop students' core academic skills. This is typically achieved through face-to-face tutorials and lectures. However, the Covid-19 pandemic required us to adapt our teaching to fit a fully online model.

With the rapidly imposed move to online teaching, the team reflected on how we could effectively increase our engagement with students, given the importance of developing a community between students and faculty (Khan et al., 2017) within an online teaching environment. Stone and Springer (2019) suggest that providing a supportive and engaging online environment helps to reduce the difficulties faced with online teaching. We therefore decided to create, for the first time, globally accessible, multi time-zone virtual drop-in sessions, replacing our existing provision of pre-bookable and walk-in tutorials.

Due to lockdown restrictions, we were acutely conscious that students may be feeling isolated: virtual drop-in sessions offered an ideal way for them to touch base with university staff. In the traditional on campus environment, students frequently walked into

our office with a question relating to their academic work, which could be answered there and then. We designed virtual drop-in sessions as a way of replicating this environment virtually.

We originally planned to provide weekly one-hour Zoom sessions, alternating between Tuesdays and Thursdays, staffed by two members of the team, to allow us to move to break-out rooms if required. Sessions were announced on the faculty student portal on Mondays, outlining their purpose as well as timings. Students were made aware that they could drop into the sessions at any point within the hour. After a brief introduction, the sessions became student-led, in that they were encouraged to ask any questions concerning their academic work. Questions outside our remit were signposted to the relevant people/departments. Students were dealt with in order of arrival. A breakout room was created if we felt that a private conversation was required, or if the query was likely to be time consuming. In terms of risk, we were conscious of factors such as 'Zoom burnout', academic workloads, technological issues, and the personal and professional impacts of Covid-19.

The response

We sought to create a relaxed, open-door student-led session, to provide reassurance to students (Hayman et al. 2020). Whilst we acknowledge Russell's (2013) caution that this approach may limit or restrict enquiries, we believed this was appropriate in such challenging circumstances. Whilst Roberts (2015) found some evidence that the voluntary nature of drop-in sessions could lead to students having little motivation to attend, we believed that we were enabling students to take ownership of their learning.

However, in early sessions we observed that several students attended believing the session to be mandatory, potentially based on their understanding of the wording of the weekly message sent to students. Whilst we addressed this on a session-by-session basis with those students present, we also reflected on the wording of our weekly message, exploring ways that the message could make the differentiation more explicit. We found that by adapting our written message and making this clear at the start of each session,

the number of students attending on the premise of the session being compulsory gradually reduced.

The other main issue we faced was the number of sessions we ran each week and their timings. We decided to offer greater flexibility, increasing sessions from weekly to three/four per week, at more varied times to allow greater choice and access. We also experimented with session times to accommodate international students in different time zones. Attendance varied from an occasional empty session to those with 10-15 students attending. Students presented a range of questions, most of which were readily answered, suggesting that the sessions were an effective use of our time and theirs.

Recommendations

Having provided these sessions for an academic year we offer the following reflections. Drop-in sessions are an ideal format for addressing issues requiring minimal time to resolve, for example, how to reference a particular source, or where to locate materials such as reading lists. More complex issues still benefit from personalised one-to-one, hour long sessions. One of the positive outcomes of the sessions has been that students have gone on to book individual sessions, with the drop-ins acting as a form of stepping stone to more focused, personalised sessions. Students have also shared knowledge, for example about hand in dates or supporting materials located on the faculty's VLE, mediated by us where necessary. This has enhanced peer-to-peer learning and added to individual students' sense of confidence and belonging. It has also provided students with the opportunity to touch base with members of the academic community, or 'lurk' as an observer, with several returning once they understood the space they were in. In-session feedback from students suggests that they have particularly benefited from asking assignment-specific questions, which often led to clarification or interpretation, as well as querying general issues of referencing and academic conventions, and receiving pastoral encouragement to continue writing.

The successful drop-in sessions are now embedded into our practice. When we return to campus we will explore how we can continue to offer these valuable sessions in what will

be a mixed mode of delivery. For colleagues considering offering drop-in sessions (on campus or online) as part of their LD provision, we make the following suggestions:

- Be explicit in student messaging about the purpose of the drop-in sessions, particularly around their voluntary nature, as well as the scope. Whilst we considered tailoring sessions to a particular topic or cohort, on reflection, the open-door policy of the sessions, in which we avoided imposing any restrictions or barriers, was one of the drop-ins' attractions.
- Ensure the sessions are adequately staffed. Where possible we began each session with two members of staff present. This allows for the creation of breakout rooms, for example to search for resources to respond to a particular query whilst the other member of staff maintained conversations with students. This approach also allowed for one member of staff to leave the session part way through if the numbers present were manageable for one person.
- Be flexible. This means reviewing the provision on a regular basis, considering which days/times facilitate the highest level of attendance.

The Covid-19 pandemic gave the LD team an opportunity to review our practice and create innovative ways of engaging with students in a virtual world. Within a challenging environment it has been both rewarding and encouraging to develop a new intervention that has had such a positive impact on our students' experience.

References

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