Digital Excellence Impact Case Studies

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Learning Presence and Learner
Engagement Through Clusters

by Seibu Mary Jacob

Planning Your Module	Introducing Your Module to Students	Structuring Your Content	Design, Collaboration and Construction of Knowledge	Formative: Putting Your Learning into Application	Designing Your Summative Assessment	Concluding Your Module

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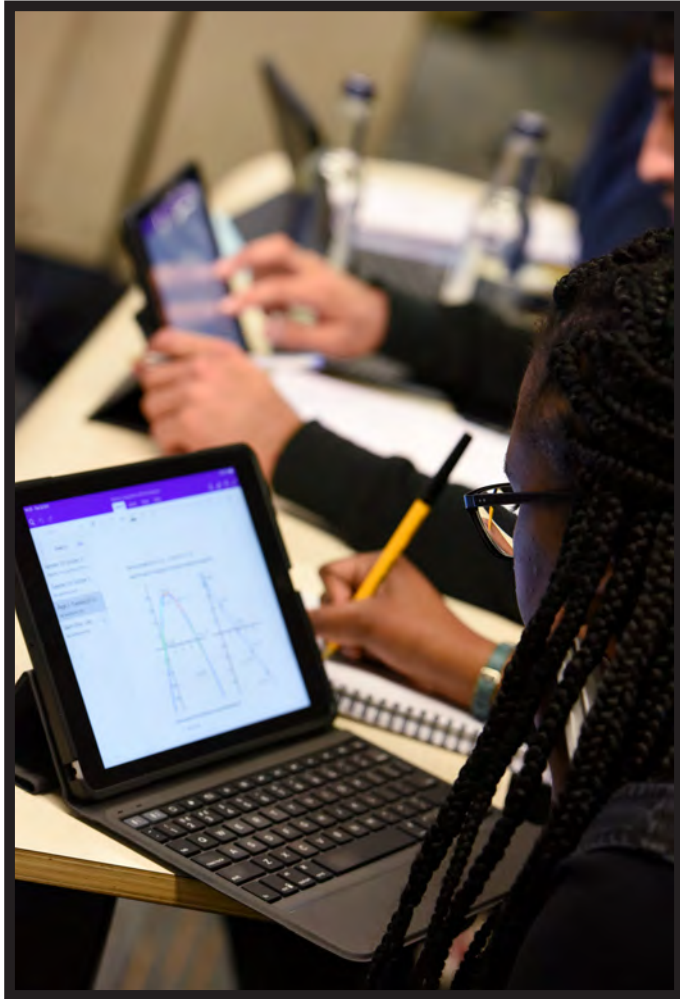
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Although hybrid learning can have some benefits, it poses clear challenges. Seibu Jacob, Senior Lecturer in SCEDT, faced these challenges and found a great solution to overcome them. She found that the main challenges she was facing were the lack of personal interaction from the student with the tutor - students had never seen Seibu and had never experienced what it is like to be in her classroom, students being new to the university and becoming lost in the virtual world, students becoming lost in the large class numbers and finding it hard to make real friendships. Her idea of the virtual learning experience was that students would all be present, cameras on and ready to learn and contribute to the class, but what she was faced with was students who didn't want to turn their cameras on or contribute to the discussion. This could be due to lack of confidence for the students and the overwhelming numbers in the class that they would have to share their ideas with.

A model was created that started with strong and clear staff communications and expectations. There was emphasis on collaboration between students as well as student motivation, due to the fact that this has a great impact on student wellbeing which is something that is highly important.

Seibu's strategy to overcome this problem and encourage learner presence and engagement was to create 'clusters'. Clusters were envisioned as small study groups of a maximum of six students as well as a leader. A set of 17 leaders were chosen by Seibu from the class of 83 students, based on Maths Diagnostic test scores and activeness in the class shown in the first two weeks of the semester. The 17 cluster leaders were announced to the class and students were encouraged to contact the leaders through Microsoft Teams in order to join their cluster. The cluster leader was responsible for facilitating a weekly Teams learning session outside of the contact hours of the module. During the weekly Teams tutorials, the students were asked to break out into their Clusters and discuss a set of questions within a designated time. The aim of the cluster was to act as a point of peer-to-peer contact in regards to general queries, homework and revision, in order to encourage independent learning as well as giving students an opportunity to make new friends. The Cluster leaders reported to Seibu once every two weeks after their weekly lecture.

This new strategy came with its positives and negatives. The cluster leaders were enthusiastic to gather and interact with other students on Teams. The clusters build up good friendships and progressed well with the content. Since the cluster leader now became the main point of contact with Seibu, it meant that they acted as a representative for the group and filtered out queries that students could answer between themselves before going to Seibu for any extra help. Sharing this information between themselves meant that they got to know each other more. The students had thoughtful, peer-to-peer conversations about the module content and the chats during the lectures became more active, with more informal communication between students. This showed that the students had gained confidence and become a lot more comfortable with each other.

In the future, this mode of learning using clusters could be transferred into the in-person teaching experience, giving students further opportunity for peer-to-peer learning.

When Seibu was asked what digital excellence means to her, she said "To me, Digital excellence involves embedding the right curriculum for digital skills for Gen Z and millenial learners. This means developing skill sets that learners can use to transcend the curriculum and really work through from university to career. Carefully designed and intentional interactions can be effective in supporting students working through digital environments. But there is no one patch that's going to absolutely fit everybody, hence a mix of techniques is the way forward. "

Impact: The strategy of Clusters is an application of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory and developed from my interest in an active classroom learning community. My students were able to build a learning community through student empowerment despite the remote classrooms we were in. Lack of interaction is a main source of dissatisfaction in online environments and large classrooms, thus affecting attrition rates and course performance. The Clusters strategy is beneficial for both remote and face to face classrooms across courses for student support and improve the student learning experience.

On the other hand, some students did not like to work in groups and therefore chose not to contribute or join the clusters, leading to them continuing to be isolated. Some cluster leaders and members struggled with their internet connection and organisation of the session and therefore wasted a lot of time in their break out spaces. In addition, some students were still not comfortable with having their cameras on, resulting in some clusters feeling quite cold. Some students did not get along with their cluster leader, which lead to some tension and disagreements. Finally, some clusters included students who did not respond to Teams messages, leading to the sessions becoming disjointed.

Overall, this strategy resulted in many positives that could be carried into other modules across the university. Although remote learning has a chance to disconnect the academics and students and affect learner engagement, with a balance of expectations combined with intentional activities a boost in student engagement can be achieved.