

Effective approaches to teaching and learning in business distance education

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Abstract

Active student and tutor engagement is key to successful teaching and learning. However, unlike face-to-face teaching and learning, online delivery in the distance education presents a unique challenge. This study presents effective teaching and learning strategies implemented in a UK based business school in their distantly delivered undergraduate program. The implemented strategies aimed to foster a higher level of student and tutor engagement through the design and delivery of the programme. Based on the self-regulated theory, the paper presents 'inquiry-based learning' approaches through the production of 'inquiry-based learning materials' and 'research-based assessment' strategies that supported students to become active and collaborative learners in distance education. The reflections through the implemented strategies contribute to the wider discourse of active teaching and learning methods and how a technologically enhanced learning environment may align with self-regulated learning. This paper contributes to a developing field of research related to the design and delivery of online courses in the pursuit of active student and tutor engagement in business higher education.

Keywords: online learning; active teaching and learning; student engagement; self-regulated theory

Introduction

Universities and educational institutions throughout the world are experiencing a rapid transition, more of abrupt nature in their teaching and learning practices in the recent years due to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic (Huang & Wang, 2023). Even before, with the advancements of technologies, learning platforms and tools educators moved for online delivery of courses due to the flexibility, availability and the ability for expanding the market with low cost involved (Sun et al., 2019; Barba et al., 2016). This transition in the form of distance learning is identified by many terms (online learning, web-based learning, m-learning, etc.) but, in common it is the possibility for students to learn from anywhere, anytime and with any means (Cojocariu et al., 2014). However, this online migration of teaching and learning is a challenge to many higher education (HI) institutions in terms of mapping their online educational activities while achieving active student and tutor engagements (Lassoued et al., 2020; Huang & Wang 2023; Besser et al., 2020) in digital platforms. Student engagement is considered a prerequisite in distance learning due to the geographical isolation the students and teachers experience (Hew, 2016). Studies of diverse disciplines demonstrated that well designed distance learning led to students' enhanced engagements and satisfaction (Zheng et al., 2017; Bahasoan et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2019).

Students' active engagement is a challenge in traditional face-to-face classroom settings and more so in online delivered courses (Besser et al., 2020). As defined by Allen and Tanner (2005), active learning is "seeking new information, organising it in a meaningful way and having the chance to explain to others" (2005, p.262). Studies have proven that active learning strategies improve students' learning and their attitudes towards learning (Armbruster et al., 2009; Stoten et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2019). However, designing and implementing teaching tools and tutor engagement to facilitate active student learning in online delivered course is a challenge to many higher education institutions (Wu & Li, 2020; Zapata-Cuervo et al., 2021).

This paper elaborates few strategies that was practically and successfully implemented in a technologically enhanced learning (TEL) environment to promote active engagement of students and tutors in a UK based HE institution. In particular, the paper focuses on specific cases where the writer together with a teaching team, has developed strategies to create a rich learning environment across a distance online programme delivered to the students of three Asian countries; Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Mongolia, by a Business School based in the United Kingdom.

Literature Review

It has been long recognised the significance of the andragogic approach to learning which emphasised empowering students to be enabled to gain control over their learning (Zimmerman, 1989; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Raley et al., 2022). In this respect, self-regulated learning (SRL) plays a central role that places the student at the centre of the learning process, which devolves the responsibility for learning onto the student (Stoten, 2015, Carter et al., 2020). SRL is defined by Pintrich as cited by Schunk (2005, p.173) as:

“An active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation, and behaviour, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment”.

Research on academic self-regulation has identified that students exposed to the SRL methods are more likely to achieve the learning goals while enjoying the learning process which has a positive impact on developing life-long learning skills (Rakovic et al., 2022; Pardo et al., 2017). SRL theory challenges the conventional didactic and teacher-centred learning methods by placing more emphasis on students and how they manage their learning through goal setting, commitment, and meta-cognition. Despite the significance of SRL in an effective learning process, Virtanen, Nevgi, and Niemi (2013) and Rakovic et al., (2022) noted the less attention by higher education institutions on improving the SRL skills among the students. Moreover, only a handful of

research has been carried so far on using SRL in the online learning environment to determine whether these strategies are of equivalent use and practical.

A key component of the online learning process is mastering the learning technology by knowing the features of the online platform and its use (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Besides, Student control over their learning strategy is central to SRL. In this, the process of self-reflection that involves reacting to, observing, and judging the learning experience would assist the students and tutors in modifying their level of motivation and the choice of learning strategy to maximise the level of achievement (Boekaerts & Cascallar, 2006; Russell et al., 2022). Reflections provide an opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate the teaching and learning process both to tutors and to students. Learning through reflections enables students to progress and improve the quality of their learning experience (Harrison, Short, & Roberts, 2003). Another theme of SRL relates to the concept of self-efficacy. It is an integral part of the process of metacognition as the participants reflect on their learning experience. Zimmerman (1989) has recognised self-efficacy as a consequence of interaction with other participants and their feedback. Giving constructive feedback is important in building up a student's self-efficacy, which helps to reinforce the self-image of the student (Uribe & Vaughan 2017). As Zimmerman (1989) mentioned, the frequency and immediacy of the feedback are both important in constructing a student's self-image. TELs which offer more opportunities for formative feedback, reviews or assessment promoted learning support, interactive collaborations and reflection (Dooly & Sadler 2020).

Self-efficacy is closely associated with the students' emotional condition (Bandura, 1997, Heo et al., 2022). As suggested by the goal theory, students are not simply derived by the attainment of goals but need to deal with their emotional state. In this, constructive feedback would contribute to the positive self-image, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999). This need to be a considered majorly in online teaching as the

student is learning by themselves in isolated locations without the face-to-face association of their peers and tutors (Aldhahi et al., 2022). Therefore, identifying teaching and learning strategies that assist the students in gaining a positive self-image would increase their level of motivation, effort, and achievement in an online environment. Learning design plays a pivotal role in online education in terms of student engagement, retention and persistence (Mangaroska & Giannakos, 2018; David et al., 2018). There are limited empirical evidence on the effective use of learning design on different learning activities on diverse socio economic and geo-cultural groups (Rizvi et al., 2022). Learner engagement can be enhanced with a careful attention to the detailed interactions of various types of learning activities including reading materials (Rizvi et al., 2020), assignment tasks (Bearman et al., 2020), video contents (Davis, 2019) and discussion forums (Zou et al., 2021). Evidence suggests the influence of regional, cultural and socioeconomic factors for student engagement and persistence in distance learning (Rizvi et al, 2019; Allione & Stein, 2016). These regional and cultural differences highlight the need of HE providers to be more sensitive in designing learning activities to be matched with the different understanding of learners coming from different geo-cultural regions (Bozkurt & Aydin, 2018; Rizvi et al., 2019; Ruiperez-Valiente et al., 2020). Learners from English-speaking countries and Asian countries shown differences in their task-taking behaviours and discussion forum participation (Liu et al., 2016). Studies found that majority of active learners are in developed countries (Ruipeze-Valiente et al., 2020; Kizilcec et al, 2017) and African and Asian learners are less persistent in accessing digital resources and materials (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015).

Despite the advances to knowledge on educators' transition from face-to-face to distance teaching, there is still a paucity on exploring various teaching and learning activity types and its relation to diverse geo-cultural backgrounds. In certain cases, though teachers are provided with different online teaching practices yet the effectiveness of these in terms of student learning and engagement is not clear (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). As such, there is a need to

go beyond emergency online teaching practices and to develop quality and more effective strategies in distance education to enhance student and tutor engagement.

Building on this need, this paper discusses on few teaching and learning strategies adopted by the writer with a teaching team in delivering distance online courses to a large cohort of undergraduate students residing in Asia. The implemented strategies contributed to improving the active engagement of students as well as tutors of the online course.

Research Context

The distance delivered programme considered in this paper is an undergraduate business programme offered by a UK based business school located in north-east of England to nearly 400 students residing in three Asian countries: Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Mongolia. It is a top-up degree where the first two years of the degree program is delivered face-to-face through the partner institutions of the UK university. Students are then continuing the third year of the degree program, which is also their final year through a digital platform; Blackboard. Three modules are taught in the final year with a dissertation component by a panel of teachers who are based in the UK business school. The teaching panel comprised with module leaders and 15 tutors. The writer was a module leader for an accounting module and was leading the distance learning program as the program leader. After encountering few challenges in terms of weak student and tutor engagement, low performance of students and high plagiarism cases, the teaching team implemented several strategies in expectation of improvement. Module specifications, assessment briefs and online learning tasks were modified to support high student engagement across modules. The next sections offer a detailed discussion on the strategies implemented in the design and delivery of the considered distance learning programme.

Re-designing Learning Activities

The curriculum of undergraduate modules which were delivered online were re-designed around the principles of 'research-rich learning', to encourage students to become active learners. In practice, this has involved the preparation, delivery, and evaluation of key module components such as the learning and assessment materials to over four hundred students from East Asia who followed the modules remotely away from the university.

In the re-modelling of modules, the module specification and the assessment brief were refined with the research-rich learning philosophy through the use of TEL platform features from the earlier more didactic, traditional base. In capitalising on this, the module specifications of the modules were re-written to stimulate maximum student engagement to make the learning journey, an active learning process that is research-rich, using an inquiry-based learning philosophy. An insight into the revision made in one of the module's specification is depicted in the figure 1.

Figure 1. Extract from the revisions made in module specification

<p>How will I learn on this module? Please provide a brief overview the learning and teaching approached the student can expect to experience.</p> <p>The <u>learning materials</u> lectures will introduce you to the main topics and theories. You will practice applying what you have learnt in <u>learning circles</u> student-centred seminars, where you will work in groups with other students to compare and analyse real company accounts.</p> <p>You will be expected to research and analyse a company in detail for your assignment. <u>Discussion board activities, collaborate sessions and learning circles</u> The seminars will equip you with the skills to be able to do this. You will be shown how to use appropriate technology, and may use this for your assignment (or dissertation) if you wish.</p> <p><u>In addition, the eLearning Portal will direct you to independent study for additional practice and reading.</u></p>
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Lectures and seminars in the module specifications were replaced with learning materials and learning circles where the students meet with their peers in the digital platform weekly to discuss the given tasks. Furthermore,

the assignment brief was redesigned with a more expansive form to stimulate the deep and active engagement of the distance learning students. Revision was needed to the assessment to make it more authentic to the context by giving an option of company selection from the student's local stock exchange of their country of residence. These changes to the assessment were discussed among the team members, agreed and sent for quality review.

Figure 2 is a snapshot taken from the 'Module modification request'.

Figure 2. The rationale for the change in assignment brief

Request for module changes requested by international distance learning unit.

It is necessary to amend some parts of the AF6000 documentation to cater to the needs of international distance learning students. For example, references to lectures and seminars are not applicable to online learning. There is also a desire to change the mode of assessment to reflect our aims to lead on research-rich learning and develop more expansive forms of assessment. In this respect, we would wish to replace multiple choice questions with extended writing that demonstrate research or enquiry-based skills.

Active Student Engagement in Technologically

In delivering distance education to the students residing in Asia, the key challenge to UK based guidance tutors was to stimulate active engagement of students with facilitators and with peers through the virtually designed module web site. The Asian pedagogical attitude is more in line with didactic teaching and learning methods where the student remains passive (Ruiperez-Valiente et al., 2020; Strachan & Liyanage, 2015). The key aspect of the 'student development journey' is when students move away from being taught, becoming autonomous, self-reliant, and curious learners (Hodge et al., 2008; Rakovic, 2022; Naik & Govindu, 2022). Pedagogical theorists argue that transitioning away from traditional didactic (tutor-led) methods represents a paradigm shift in contemporary education. One of the greatest challenges teachers face in this shift is the ability to inspire students to learn

for themselves (O'Shea & Young, 2014). According to Pratt (2002) and Rizvi et al., (2022) one-size-fits-all approach to teaching no longer works, with contemporary theorists advocating a differentiated learning experience. In other words, as enthusiasm for didactic learning methodologies fades, teachers must look to enrich students' experience with a greater variety of student-centered pedagogical activities (Rizvi et al, 2019; Sharples, 2015; Sharpe et al., 2006).

Aiming to adopt this approach, the teaching team integrated student-centered activities in the online courses such as discussion board forums, learning circles, online quizzes, reading exercises etc, and monitored its progress constantly. At the start of the programme, students' engagement was very low, and tutors had no proper concern or effort to improve the students' engagement. To address these issues, a formal practice was initiated with weekly team meetings to discuss these problems with tutors to bring different ideas and ways to develop effective learning approaches for the active engagement of students, along with ways to evaluate professional practice. With insights of peer comments and ideas, a logically connected strategy was implemented in terms of content, nature of learning materials, study tasks, student interaction with their peers and guidance tutors' activities to promote collaborative and active learning within the learning community. These strategies acquired an appreciable level of success with student engagement for the module which later inspired on other modules in the distance learning programme. Some of the activities which were implemented to stimulate active engagement of students and tutors are listed below.

- A study plan was included with a directed learning activity for each week including a journal article, and a video clip. Short online quizzes were incorporating into the module site to promote social learning and assess students' understanding. Students were expected to engage with these activities on a weekly basis.
- Blackboard online discussion board forum was incorporated weekly, aligned with the study task as mentioned in the study plan. This

allowed students to pose questions, post messages, and share ideas with their tutors and peers. Weekly announcements posted in the blackboard including a discussion point framed as an open question. Students were given the opportunity to debate the posted question via discussion board. Tutors were encouraged to respond timely and appropriately to challenge the student's ability to think critically. A reading list was attached to the module site with e-book and e-journals in supporting students' self-directed knowledge acquisition.

- Guidance tutors (15 tutors) are requested to send two emails each week prompting their students to engage with the created forums in the blackboard discussion.
- Announcements were made whenever a forum was created in the digital blackboard. At the end of each week, students who continuously contributed to the forum were appreciated by emails and announcements to motivate others. Tutors who contributed in forums to motivate students were also appreciated through team emails.
- Stimulations were given in every live collaboration session conducted each week with students. On requests, one to one session was arranged for the students who needed further support.
- Information and TEL analytics on students' engagements are exchanged among guidance tutors for further improvements. These includes number of contributions to the created forums, number of times students' access the e-books and materials, material download frequencies, number of attempts to online quizzes, attendance in live collaboration sessions etc.

These initiations had an impact on the students' engagement with the modules, where continuous student engagement increased to 55 from nine at the beginning. Students' participation in collaboration sessions (online face-to-face group meeting place) was on average 12 at the beginning which increased up to 70 or more students. This change in students' learning was also evident from the survey results. Figure 3 depicts some of the students' comments received for a module in the student survey.

Figure 3: Extract from survey evaluation results for a module

What aspects of teaching, learning and assessment did you find particularly enjoyable?

- I enjoyed deep diving into yearly reports and understanding companies' performance. It was very useful to understand how to use ratios to come up with an assessment and the company I researched.
- I found the blackboard collaboration session and the discussion board quite enjoyable.
- The assessment helped relate to a practical scenario.
- Weekly tasks and support getting from the lecturer was very helpful for my study.
- Blackboard discussion was interesting
- Blackboard sessions

The undergraduate students of the international distance learning programme are from culturally diverse backgrounds. Although diversity remains an important aspect of HE, these students face challenges, including cultural isolation and language difficulties. Many were used to a more structured approach to their education and struggle with the shift toward self-regulated learning methodologies often employed at UK Universities.

Whilst student inquiry and independent learning have become important facets of the distance learning modules, this does not mean that these students are left completely unaided. Blackboard collaborate was used to help the distance learning students to overcome the issues they face in online learning and to achieve their potential. Blackboard collaborate is one of several video-conferencing platforms that are available to educators. This platform also provided the ability to break online classes into smaller groups and facilitate group debates. Offering a safer learning with small groups has led to greater participation and engagement than in the traditional large group lectures. Students appeared to appreciate the use of small-group activities with the use of technology, commenting that they felt more

comfortable in interacting with their tutor and sharing their opinions with peers.

Like most UK education institutions, the considered business school provides students with opportunities to receive formative and summative feedback. Helping to ensure an effective approach to assessment feedback, the team employed Turnitin's Electronic Management of Assessment (EMA) features (i.e. Quick Marks, Rubrics, & Feedback Summary). Where possible, the teaching team adopted a feed-forward approach to feedback, clearly informing students how they may improve their future work in the assignments. The researcher has adopted a rigorous system for moderation to ensure a fair, consistent, and transparent approach to feedback. With 400 students enrolled in the modules, this has been an important quality assurance exercise. In practice, this has involved arranging a standardisation meeting where members of the marking team were asked to mark five scripts and compare their feedback with their colleagues. When the need arises constructive feedback was provided to the remote students using business skype technology. These discussed strategies in teaching signifies the importance of respecting students as individual, social and cultural beings who can bring a wealth of cognitive diversity to the classroom. Rather than a teacher-led approach to learning, it highlights that students are just as important to this process too.

Discussion and Conclusion

Online teaching and learning in higher education have become a major instructional modality in today's technology-focused world. In this regard, interactivity in online courses, particularly between students and tutors, plays an important role in student satisfaction and persistence. Through the reflections of practical experience, this paper discussed different pedagogical techniques to improve the active engagement of both students and tutors in online education. In this regard, three stages are identified for the development of professional practice in distance higher education.

Stage 1: Learning about the Techniques Involved in Online Learning

Effective use of research-rich, inquiry-based learning in online classrooms and distance learning courses are significant in the learning journey (Younger, 2016; Brenton, 2015). To achieve this, TEL features need to be learned and implemented by both students and tutors. The writer has discussed the use of techniques to promote independent forms of learning including learning circles, discussion board forums, Turnitin EMA features, collaborate sessions, digital analytics, and assessment techniques. Further, Ted Talks, YouTube clips, journal papers and reading lists are incorporated into the module site to promote student independent research. These self-directed learning improves students' self-efficacy and helps them to believe in their capabilities to regulate their learning (Alt, 2015; Kuo et al., 2014). Independent learning is not automatic (Kingsbury, 2014). They need to be encouraged and supported. This is achievable by providing various tasks for the student, which stimulates social and self-directed learning to experience the learning together in collaborative ways.

Stage 2: Diversity in Practice

Students from different cultures follow the online modules offered in the considered degree programme. Demonstrating diversity in the development of programme and its delivering techniques to a wider context is a top priority in the distance learning programmes. In line with this, the writer has amended module specifications and the assessment brief to be matched with the online delivery model and the context's authentic requirement. Different learning activities were included to promote students' collaborative and deeper engagement. Small group learning circles and problem-based learning were created which stimulated collective responses each week. Clear guidance was

offer through live collaborative sessions and the participation was stimulated through weekly announcements on the module site.

The virtual learning environment is occupied with different advanced technological features where students are unfamiliar in certain instances. In this regards, constant guidance was given through the student handbook on how to use technological features. The tutors were made sure that all the students participate in activities using a shared whiteboard, chat rooms, and quizzes in the digital classroom. One-to-one guidance was given to students who struggled in using these features in a VLE environment. At the end of each session, feedback was generated from the polling centre feature of VLE, to identify areas that need further support. In the modules, clear guidance was delivered to the students on proper referencing and types of plagiarisms. Students were prompted to use the plagiarism tool before the assignment submission via an announcement on the module site.

Stage 3: Reflection of Teaching Practice

As a practitioner in higher education, the writer aims to improve the distance education practices through peer observations and by giving more self-assessment opportunities for students in the online modules. Teaching reflections were supported through peer-observation and peer-reviewing. Best practices and outcomes were discussed within the teaching team more regularly. The learning analytics features available in the digital module site were used to make the learning more informed. After knowing the students' disengagement of e-materials through Kortext analytics, the teaching team attended training sessions organised by Kortext with the aim of better understanding the technological features. With this knowledge gain, the team worked on designing activities to stimulate students' engagement with e-learning materials. Students were prompted to participate in each module's feedback procedure to gain better understanding on teaching outcomes. Students' feedbacks were collected through digitally delivered questionnaires. The report generated through students' feedback was shared among the

teaching team, enabling them to reflect and overcome the weaknesses in teaching and guiding the distance learning students.

This paper discussed various mechanisms used in designing and delivering a distance online course that fosters a high level of student and tutor engagement. Utilization of these types of pedagogic methods are common in online course delivery. However, it is important to note that regardless of the different tools being utilised in an online delivery, designing an effective online course involves careful planning of the course design with considerable resources and a dedicated team of facilitators who are well concerned about students' active engagement. The strategies discussed in this paper bring the writer's practical experience in the online delivery of distance learning programme of an English business school in the United Kingdom. Sharing this experience would help other higher education practitioners to improve active student learning and tutor engagement in the digital environment. It is vital and timely to re-think the use of different tools and techniques in online classes to accommodate the lack of physical proximity experienced in such a delivery that infuses active learning into the course design.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares there is no conflict of interest exists in this paper. All materials included in this study represent the authors own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. This work has not been previously published nor is it is being considered for publication elsewhere.

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