Active participation in synchronous online tutorials

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Online synchronous tutorials, using Adobe Connect, are an important part of the UK Open University’s teaching. However, there is often a lack of active participation by students in online tutorials.

Our project investigates the factors affecting students’ active engagement in online tutorials.

• *What are the factors affecting student engagement in online tutorials?*

• *To what extent do the challenges of student engagement vary across faculties?*

• *How can these challenges be addressed?*
AN ONLINE ROOM in Adobe Connect

Put a X on 3 or 4 places in Europe you have been to. Make the share pod full screen if it helps.

Start a conversation with everyone or chat privately with the Hosts, Presenters or any Attendee.
RESEARCH METHODS

Two large-scale surveys - of students and of tutors
- 620 students and 197 tutors responded
- 18 modules covering all four faculties
- Similar questions in each survey
- Quantitative and qualitative data

Focus groups - with students and tutors
- 14 online focus groups
- Separate groups for students and tutors
- Covered (separately) all four faculties

Questions about topics such as …
- What sort of activities are included in online tutorials?
- Do students actively participate?
- If they don’t, why might this be?
**FINDINGS : Tools and activities**

Activities included in tutorials

- **Answering questions**
- **Asking questions**
- **Taking part in a poll or quiz**
- **Discussions in the main room**
- **Discussions in break out rooms**
- **Solving problems**
- **Practising skills**
- **Contributing on the whiteboard**
- **Other**

- **Students**
- **Tutors**
“I’m a nervous speaker however there’s no pressure and often when I use the chat box my comment is addressed which is good confidence boost.” [student]
FINDINGS : Practices across faculties

Tutor responses across faculties to ...

Do students actively take part in activities?

- Most or all students do
- A few students do
- Hardly any students do
### FINDINGS: Students’ confidence with active participation

The chart below illustrates the reasons for students not participating actively during tutorials, as reported by students and tutors. The chart indicates the percentage of students and tutors who identified each reason.

#### Reasons for not participating actively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Tutors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy to just listen</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace too fast</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical problems</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too nervous</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have a microphone</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have a webcam</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried what tutor might think</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried what other students might think</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure how to use Adobe Connect</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have nothing to contribute</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not confident about their knowledge</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind in module studies</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home/surrounding envt. not suitable</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many students in the group</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too few students in the group</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial being recorded</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chart shows that the primary reasons cited by students and tutors are similar, with "Happy to just listen" being the most common reason identified by both groups.
FINDINGS: Students’ confidence with active participation

- Before a tutorial 50% of students looked forward to it, 10% felt anxious.

Students feel stressed in online tutorials when they are expected to actively take part

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Tutors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Around a third of students (32.7%) feel stressed when expected to take part and half of tutors (50.5%) thought that students felt stressed.

‘For me personally, it's confidence. I always feel as though I'm going to make myself look stupid with what I might want to say.’ [student]
FINDINGS: Passive attendance versus active participation

- I am [students are] happy just to listen' - was the most popular choice for why students do not actively participate (selected by 20% of students and 13% of tutors)

  “I'm more of a listener than a talker and I prefer to take in what everyone else contributes than to miss something thinking about what I might contribute -…” [student]

  “I say it's fine to listen without actively participating and that I don't put people on the spot.” [tutor]

  “Some people don’t want to be interactive – so that should be ok. Some really enjoy it but there is no point in dragging everyone in if they don’t want to.” [student]

- Should we expect all students to actively participate?
- Are there still benefits to attending even without participating?
- Are there other underlying reasons for not actively participating?
FINDINGS: Passive attendance versus active participation

- How do we encourage students without causing stress?
- Perhaps by highlighting the benefits of taking part:

Two thirds of students (66%) and almost all tutors (92%) do feel that there is benefit in actively taking part in tutorials.

“More encouragement for anxious students to voice opinions” [student]
FINDINGS: Beliefs about learning

“it is important to participate actively, especially in terms of asking questions ... sometimes the other students ask questions that I haven't even thought about” [student]
INTERPRETING THE DATA

Student participation in activities
  • Many students enjoy participating and think it is beneficial
  • But some students find it stressful

Reasons for not actively participating
  • Students may not be confident in their knowledge or may be behind in the module
  • They may be worried about what other students, or the tutor, might think of them
  • Many are happy just to watch and listen, and they find benefits from this

Tutors’ perspectives
  • Tutors think interaction is helpful for students and for tutors
  • Tutors understand the limitations of online interaction, and the benefits of anonymity
RECOMMENDATIONS

Encouraging participation and highlighting the value to students

- Students need to be persuaded of the value of active participation and then given the confidence to do it!
- Discussing with students the ‘protocols’ of effective synchronous communication (e.g. the value of visual and voice interaction; how not to dominate discussions).
- Activities are needed to build confidence in the online medium before they need to use it for academic purposes.
- Alternative ways of participating: ways to contribute anonymously (whiteboard), simple warm up activities (polls).

Development of teaching staff / tutors

- Educators need to allow for a wide range of preferences from students, rather than trying to ‘force’ students to participate.
- Friendly approach, materials in advance, no surprises!
- Supporting tutors in managing online rooms where a small number of students dominate discussions.
- Knowing what to avoid - e.g. breakout rooms can be difficult to get right; not asking students (repeatedly) to use the mic (or other features) - if they don't want to, they won't, and it creates frustration for students.
THANK YOU

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