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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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Tutors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answering questions</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking part in a poll or quiz</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions in the main room</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions in break out rooms</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solving problems</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practising skills</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing on the whiteboard</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FINDINGS: Tools and features

Students prefer to use the text chat rather than speak in online tutorials

“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

![Bar chart showing participation levels across faculties](chart.png)
FINDINGS: Students’ confidence with active participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for not participating actively</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>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical problems</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too nervous</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have a microphone</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have a webcam</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried what tutor might think</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried what other students might think</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure how to use Adobe Connect</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have nothing to contribute</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not confident about their knowledge</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind in module studies</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home/surrounding envt. not suitable</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many students in the group</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too few students in the group</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial being recorded</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

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.