Active participation in synchronous online learning

Karen Kear, Jon Rosewell, Helen Donelan
The Open University, UK

Team members
Karen Kear, Helen Donelan, Jon Rosewell (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)
Paige Cuffe, Tracey Elder (Arts and Social Sciences)
Allan Mooney, Kevin Amor, Carol Edwards (Business and Law)
Kieron Sheehy, Ale Okada (Wellbeing, Education, and Language Studies)

EDEN Annual Conference, Dublin, 18-20th June 2023
Online synchronous tutorials, led by a tutor and using Adobe Connect, are an important part of Open University distance learning.

However, there is often a lack of active participation by students.

Our project addressed the following research questions:

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

• *To what extent do the challenges of active student participation 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
  • Included 18 modules covering all four faculties of the OU
  • Similar questions in both surveys
  • 620 students responded (8% response rate)
  • 197 tutors responded (22% response rate)
  • Quantitative and qualitative data

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

Questions (in focus groups and surveys) about topics such as …
  • What sort of activities are included in online tutorials?
  • Do students actively participate?
  • If they don’t, why is this?
FINDINGS: Activities in online 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

[Bar chart showing activities and their percentages for students and tutors]
FINDINGS: Text chat versus speaking

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

[Graph showing preferences]

[Quote from a student] “I’m not super comfortable speaking to strangers by any stretch of the imagination however I realise its a good skill to learn”
FINDINGS : Engagement across faculties

Tutor responses across faculties to ...

![Chart showing engagement across faculties](chart-image)
FINDINGS: Reasons for not participating actively

- Happy to just listen
- Not confident about their knowledge
- Worried what other students might think
- Too nervous
- Behind in module studies
- Have nothing to contribute
- Worried what tutor might think
- Pace too fast
- Tutorial being recorded
- Home/surrounding envt. not suitable
- Technical problems
- Too many students in the group
- Do not have a microphone
- Too few students in the group
- Not sure how to use Adobe Connect
- Do not have a webcam

(Bar chart showing percentages of students and tutors for each reason)
FINDINGS: Lack of confidence about active participation

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

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

[from a student] ‘nobody wants to put an opinion forward and to be perceived as to be wrong, or that it's not the popular opinion’
FINDINGS : Passive attendance versus active participation

[From a student] “I always attend the tutorials. I'm not a chatty person in those tutorials. I have to say I'm more of a listener and a note taker.”

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

• Should we expect all students to actively participate?
• Are there benefits to attending even without participating?
FINDINGS: Benefits of active participation

[From a student] “I think it's important to take part one way or another, either to speak or to use the chat box.”
FINDINGS: Beliefs about learning

[From a student] “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”
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.

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

Encourage participation and highlight value to students

- Persuade students that active participation is valuable and give them confidence to do it!
- Discuss the ‘protocols’ of effective synchronous communication (e.g. value of webcam & voice; how not to dominate discussions).
- Activities to build confidence in online platform before academic use.
- Offer other ways of participating: e.g. anonymous whiteboard, polls

Development of teaching staff / tutors

- Educators should allow for student preferences, not ‘force’ students to participate.
- Friendly approach, materials in advance, no surprises!
- How to manage online rooms where a small number of students dominate.
- Know what to avoid - e.g. breakout rooms are difficult; don’t insist on using mic
THANK YOU

karen.kear@open.ac.uk
helen.donelan@open.ac.uk
jon.rosewell@open.ac.uk