

"I didn't realise this was stuff that could actually help us... with actually learning"

Student perceptions & experiences of Active Blended Learning [ABL]



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201 students (+ 24 Pilot Study)

Education and Humanities	13.93%	Foundation	2.48%
Health and Society	58.20%	Level 4	39.8%
Art, Science and Technology	18.9%	Level 5	45.27%
Business and Law	8.95%	Level 6	9.45%
		Level 7	2.98%

47 Semi-structured qualitative focus groups
Inductive, thematic coding (Nvivo)

TIP 1: Build relationships and support students.

A key contributing factor to student engagement with online tasks is the way that the students feel about their relationship with staff members. Where students feel that they have a positive relationship with staff, they are more likely to engage with set tasks (online or otherwise). Likewise the opposite was true - a negative relationship caused students to feel less inclined to engage. Students characterised this 'positive relationship' as one where there was a demonstrable sense of care and empathy. This was usually exhibited through well established, consistent support mechanisms and feedback on tasks. In addition, tutors that demonstrated active engagement with the students learning process online, through having a visible presence in the online environment and interacting with the students on their tasks, were more likely to see students undertake and complete tasks.

In addition, students raised the importance of clear communication with respect to the reasons and purposes behind setting learning activities; instructions for the task including how students are expected to complete tasks; as well as demonstration of technologies in class. These were all considered to be demonstrations of 'care' and led to a positive view of their relationship with staff.

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If they show interest, if they go in and read and put comments, it encourages us.

I don't feel like there is any in-session guidance, there's no 'right this is online, do this, it is to help you with this'.

They ask us to do things online then we don't talk about it again so we don't get the chance to discuss what went well or what you've found.

They've got to be there for you, to feel comfortable.

I think lecturers should engage more with student's online activities.

Why have I done it if no one will be looking at it?

It's not supportive either because you can't ask them and engage with them.

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TIP 2: The design matters.

The design of modules and the relationship between modules is critical to the success of ABL. Whilst many students acknowledged that time-management is needed in order to be successful in higher education, they felt thwarted by the design of the modules and by their own level of time-management skill. To support them in adopting good time-management they asked for more consideration to be given to programme level planning to minimise clashes between modules e.g. when non-assessed online task deadlines clashed directly with their assignment schedule or when one module has a scheduled online element but another requires them to be on campus. In addition, they raised that often online work is set less than 24 hours before the face-to-face session where the work is required, this did not give them time to complete the work. Equally, too long (more than a week) meant they were likely to forget or be distracted. Staff explaining the online components in class prior and then being visible online and providing feedback helped to bring tasks into student consciousness and promoted engagement. The skill of time-management is not necessarily one students have, feel confident with or feel any ownership over. Therefore, it needs to be developed and embedded in the teaching approach to help students increase their autonomy and confidence over time. The same is true of all academic and cognitive skills and indeed, digital literacy and use of technology. As a principle 'We should not expect students to figure out course tools on their own' (Henrie et al., 2015, Lim et al. 2006).

Relating to matters of individual task design, the current findings indicate that tasks need to be short, relevant, interactive and well-designed in terms of their aesthetic and ease of use (Greener, 2015; Henrie et al., 2015; Powell et al., 2015). Many students confess to getting distracted while doing long and, in their view, 'boring' e-tivities. These tended to be e-tivities that depended on or were entirely passive tasks, such as reading or watching videos (e.g. long PowerPoints, lengthy and complex articles, extended 'talking heads' videos). They identified that they lose track of the purpose of what they are doing. The students felt overwhelmed by the extensive amount of information in such tasks. This was largely due to a lack of task instructions (i.e. what to do with this content) and/ or clear alignment between the purpose of the online task and the wider learning process. Students regularly articulate being unsure what they are looking for, why and how this will help with the class to follow or later on their assignments. Students appreciate when reading or watching is embedded in a clear task that helps them make sense of what they are reading or watching. Even more preferable is that tasks have practical application with clear relevance to their working practice and value in terms of the way it will help their future career. Therefore, more practical online tasks and sessions which mirror professional experiences are expected to achieve better engagement and learning results. Last but not least, the aesthetic qualities of online components are critical - a neat and clear aesthetic is thought to lead to ease of navigation and operation (Lopez-Perez, et al. 2011; Salmon, 2013). Furthermore, welcoming colours (light and bright but aligned to accessibility standards), good quality, relevant visual material and use of multimedia improve student engagement.

In some instances, the students seemed to think that there had been a reduction in contact time on their modules. This appeared to happen when F2F contact time had been shortened or cancelled at reasonably short notice without a clear line of sight to when this would be replaced, either in a later F2F session or through online contact time. This confusion was further compounded if students were set independent learning tasks to be completed online during this time, because this was then perceived as the replacement and not equivalent.

Independent learning tasks (online or otherwise) are, obviously, not considered to be contact time under the QAA or UN definitions. So, it is necessary to make it explicitly clear to students where and when their contact time is happening both in the F2F and online environment to avoid confusion. Particularly, if unforeseen circumstances have resulted in a need to change the planned timetable of contact hours.

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Sometimes the prep comes up really late so you'd have the lecture in the morning, they'd put the prep up the night before.

I don't know. Unless but more - online learning that's like interactive learning, because it's not really if it's just a lot of reading if that makes sense?

Yes, so we'll get an announcement on NILE the day before saying, 'No session tomorrow, complete this e-tivity'. It's often, again it's what our timetable says as well. So our timetable will say we're in, whereas then we'll get an announcement that says actually we're not in: 'Do this instead' at home.

Which is really bad considering I'm paying for it here but I don't know how to use it, it's not clear.

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Active Learning = Experiential, practical/ hands-on, 'real world' orientated, collaborative & reflexive
Blended Learning = Technology-enhanced learning, Face-to-face [F2F] & online combined, digital literacy
Engagement = (in the context of this study) is participation in online and F2F activities, particularly looking at completion of online tasks.

TIP 3: Student beliefs about learning and teaching, particularly independent learning, impact their motivation.

Student motivation to learn independently is crucial for successful ABL. However, independent learning is not something students feel confident with or necessarily see the purpose of. Therefore, the lecturer has a critical role in outlining the value of independence, autonomy and agency in learning to students in order to foster and bolster student motivation and confidence. This further underpins the importance of the positive relationship between tutor and student already outlined. The tutor has to make sure that concepts of learning and approaches to HE teaching are well-explained in order to avoid confusion and to dispel myths. There is often an assumption that only learning validated by staff presence or corrective feedback is equal to 'good' or 'successful' learning (Salmon, 2013; Singleton, 2013). Equally, the 'learning styles' myth is still very dominant and becomes a barrier to engagement in diverse learning activities. To help overcome the gap between student and staff beliefs about learning roles and responsibilities the following may be helpful:

- Outline a structured plan of the module and refer to it regularly.
- Explain the rationale behind ABL - in particular the role of independent learning and online learning components. Return to this conversation regularly.
- Build opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning.
- Provide opportunities for two-way feedback on learning & teaching.

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They [lecturers] are telling you that it's important for you to do it but at the same time the way they're conveying that message to you, it doesn't seem like it's important to do it.

Because some people might just think, 'Oh, it's just extra stuff, it's not important or anything'.

I suppose also reminding students that this is University level, that we're here because we want to be here, not because we're being forced to be here, so it's up to us to take control of our learning.

I mean, when it comes to me sometimes it's hard to force myself to just sit and do some work. I don't know, it just, it depends on a person. Like, how well organised you are and how much time do you want to devote to learning.

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