

Stakeholder Summary

Students More Engaged When Instructors Focus on Interaction Instead of Lectures

Many students are concerned about the learning challenges presented by large first-year university classes, particularly the “impersonal” nature of lectures. A new study by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that by re-designing courses to provide lecture content online and focusing instructor time on discussion and problem solving, students show a stronger engagement with the material and a more in-depth style of learning. However, these types of courses increase workload for both students and instructors and require additional resources.

Project Description

Large First-Year Course Re-Design to Promote Student Engagement and Student Learning focuses on first-year geography students at Queen’s University. Traditionally, the first-year human geography course is taught as a lecture-only style program to more than 400 students, with classes three times a week. The study examines two modified versions of the course. In winter 2011, 157 students took part in an “intensive blended” course model which provided most of the typical lectures online and required students to attend a small 50-student interactive discussion and problem-solving course once a week. In fall 2011, 324 students took the course as a “reduced resources blended” hybrid between the two offerings, where fewer lectures were offered online and students were only required to attend four, three-hour discussion sessions throughout the semester. The study is based on data gathered at the end of each term using the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE) and the Study Process Questionnaire, which measure if a student has a surface or deep approach to learning. Small focus groups were also used to gather more detailed student responses.

Findings

The intensive course improved student engagement on 25 of the 38 CLASSE questions, with significant improvements in asking questions and contributing to discussions in class, integrating ideas and including diverse perspectives, working with others and giving class presentations. Students also felt the collaborative nature of the course allowed them to learn from each other.

The reduced resources model was aimed at reducing the workload concerns of students and instructors, while still maintaining the success of the intensive blended course. While students in the reduced resources model did show slightly increased engagement compared to those in the traditional lectures, their approach to learning was unchanged. Students were also less satisfied with the course, expressing concerns over its structure, lack of interaction and reliance on independent online study. They also said that despite the reduced number of discussion classes, the workload was still more than a typical class.

The authors argue there may be a solution somewhere between the two blended course models examined in the study and recommend experimenting with course content and clearly communicating

the demands, purpose and expectations of the course in advance. The study also notes that the reliance on technology with these course designs may require institutions to upgrade their infrastructure if they are to be widely implemented. University facilities may also be insufficient as the increased number of smaller discussion groups would require more rooms than are often available. The role of instructors in these courses would also have to be fundamentally changed from providing information and insight to managing the learning environment for students and rethinking what material is best suited for independent online study and what requires more face-to-face engagement.

Large First-Year Course Re-Design to Promote Student Engagement and Student Learning was prepared by Andrew Leger, Anne Godlewska, Jones Adjei, Laura Schaepli, Scott Whetstone, Jessica Finlay, Ron Roy and Jennifer Massey, Queen's University.