Self-assessment of online participation: Using a reflective approach to enhancing student experience

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Abstract: The use of online technology in education continues to grow (Canadian Virtual University, 2012; Kanuka, 2008; White, Warren, Faughnan, & Manton, 2010) and student engagement is critical to the successful achievement of educational goals. It is therefore valuable for educators to understand how to support student engagement in online environments. As self-assessment has the potential to increase student engagement (Kearney, 2013), a component of the final grade in an online master's course was determined through the use of a student self-assessment journal. After the conclusion of the course, students completed a survey, with both Likert scale and open-ended questions, in which they reflected on how the journal affected their feelings of engagement with peers and their instructor. Quantitative data was summarized and the four key themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis include: accountability, activity design, learner agency, and motivation.

Introduction

As part of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research project, this paper will explore the use of self-assessment to increase student engagement in a master's level course at a university in Western Canada. As the use of online technology grows (Canadian Virtual University, 2012; Kanuka, 2008; White, Warren, Faughnan, & Manton, 2010), it is critical that we explore the impact of technology on student participation and engagement in online courses. While numerous studies have been conducted exploring the value of student journaling to deepen reflection (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010; Samuels & Betts, 2007; T.S. & Dyment, 2011), as well as student participation in online courses (Hew & Cheung, 2012; Penny & Murphy, 2009; Shearer, Gregg, & Joo, 2005), research into the impact of self-assessment journals on student participation, and engagement in online learning environments is sparse. In this research, we refer to participation as contribution. Kearney (2013) noted that self-assessment holds potential to positively impact student engagement in their learning and with this in mind, a self-assessment tool was developed to provide graduate students with the opportunity to reflect on their contribution to their online course experience. All students in the course completed the self-assessment activity, which was a component of their final grade. After the completion of the course, students were asked to take part in an optional survey and reflect on potential connections between completing the journal, their contribution to the classroom, and their feelings of engagement with other course participants and their instructor.

The university at which the research was conducted delivers predominantly graduate level programs to working professionals. Degrees are delivered in blended format, with some programs offered entirely online. The course in this research was primary delivered in an asynchronous format with some synchronous sessions. The university has a learning and teaching model (*Royal Roads University Learning and Teaching Model*, 2013) that places emphasis on the development of supportive learning communities built through collaboration with peers. In alignment with this objective, an activity was built into an online course in the MA in Learning and Technology program that encouraged student contribution to the online classroom. Students were required to participate in two of the four course discussion forums, and then complete a self-assessment journal to reflect on their contribution. They were provided with a rubric (Table 1) outlining the expectations for their contribution to the learning community, intended to guide both their interactions and their self-assessment:

	Excellent Contribution (A+ to A-)	Good Contribution (B+ to B-)	Poor Contribution (F)
Critical Thinking	Consistently provides posts that are analytical and that demonstrate the author's insights, observations, and reflections; includes relevant examples; offers substantive questions and suggests ideas to enhance further discussion; includes citations to external materials of high academic quality; provides ideas, alternatives or actions not previously identified.	Provides some posts that are insightful and reflective but usually offers only a surface level analysis that lacks insights, observations and reflections; provides some follow-up questions that are cursory and unsubstantive and do not help move the conversation forward; rarely includes citations to external materials of high academic quality.	Provides post(s) that lack analysis, insights, observations and reflections; does not provide follow-up questions for the group to consider.
Response and Synthesis	Consistently provides responses to colleagues that include a thoughtful treatment of the original post; provides responses that demonstrate the student's ability to synthesize information and share this synthesis in a way that deepens the class's collective understanding and move the discussion towards a thoughtful conclusion; provides posts that demonstrate application of learning and are based in the course readings, conceptual materials presented, outside reading and experiences.	Occasionally will synthesize others' posts and current information and share this in a way that contributes to the class's understanding; provides some contributions that lack connections to the responses from others and do not represent intentional, synthesized thought or advance the discussion in a substantive way.	Provides responses that offer minimal analysis, lack depth, and do not advance the discussion.
Communication	Provides timely individual postings that are well-written and succinct (2-3 paragraphs on average), on topic, and written in a style appropriate for the particular kind of activity or exercise; uses appropriate grammar; spells correctly; and shows consistent evidence of appropriate proof-reading.; provides excellent constructive feedback and seeks feedback from	Provides posts that contain some spelling, grammar and punctuation errors; lack brevity; or distract from the comments or questions made by others; provides some good feedback and sometimes seeks feedback from others; comments and questions are usually relevant and sometimes contribute to moving the discussion forward.	Provides contributions that contain numerous grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors; shows evidence of a style of writing that consistently fails to facilitate communication. Rarely provides relevant input or

	others; comments and questions are excellent, on topic, original and contribute to moving the discussion forward.		feedback in a timely or constructive manner.
Professional Knowledge	Consistently provides excellent responses in posts that demonstrate a breadth and depth of understanding, integrates course materials, are analytical and makes linkages to professional practice; solve problems using principles and educational theories; includes citations to external materials of high academic quality.	Provides responses in posts that demonstrate some breadth and depth of understanding, integrates course materials, are analytical and makes some linkages; identifies principles and educational theories for problem solving; includes some citations to external materials of high academic quality.	Provides minimal, if any, demonstration of application of learning, contribution of facts, theories and principles in discussions.

Table 1: Contribution Rubric

Activity: Self Assessment Journal – Contribution to the Learning Community

After contributing to discussion forums, students completed the following self-assessment journal activity:

Please self assess your contribution to the course, and then upload your document to the *Self Assessment Journal – Contribution to the Learning Community* dropbox in Moodle. In each rubric category, you should provide examples and supporting rationale, with links to posts made in the course discussion forums as appropriate; be specific with your supporting rationale and clearly demonstrate your ability to document your contribution in a reflective manner. You should focus on your strengths, as well as how you could improve, when compared to the expectations outlined in the rubric.

Methodology

Taking a mixed-methods approach (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), we developed an online survey that included both five-point Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. We developed the Likert scale questions to allow students to provide demographic information, and rank their feelings of connection to other students and the instructor, as well as how the self-assessment of their contribution affected their learning and engagement in the course. In addition to the Likert scale ranking, we provided comment boxes so that students could elaborate on their responses to the questions asked. In the open-ended questions, we asked participants to share practical suggestions with regards to how self-assessment could have been improved to encourage contribution, and provide examples of how contribution self-assessment helped or hindered their participation in the course. Using an inductive approach, we each conducted an independent examination of the data set and then came together to triangulate and complete the next round of analysis, which identified eleven initial sub-themes. The final round of analysis was conducted by the first author and resulted in the collapsing of the initial eleven sub-themes into four key themes.

Findings

Of the 28 students taking part in the course, 19 participants responded to the survey, with 17 completing it, providing a participation rate of 68%, and a completion rate of 61%. Of the 17 who completed the survey, 13 were female and 4 were male. The age range was 27 to 55 and, with the exception of one student from United Arab Emirates, all participants were Canadian.

Analysis of Likert Scale and Associated Comments

When asked how the contribution self-assessment affected their feeling of connection with fellow students, 29% noted that it had a positive affect, 6% stated that there was a negative affect, and the majority, 65%, believed it had no affect. Comments such as "[the activity] provided me with an opportunity to think about the value of interactions" and "contribution/participation self-assessment affected my connection with fellow students by making me aware of my responsibility to push myself out of my comfort zone and to engage with others" were provided as examples of how students felt it had a positive affect. The student who found the exercise had a negative affect noted that, "This self-assessment reflection was negative as I had a poor collaborative team experience. Reflection in my case only brought forward the below average experience with specific members of the team. Some of these elements were out of my control but still reflected negatively on me".

In answering the question on their feelings of connection to instructor, 18% of students responded that the activity had a positive affect, 65% noted that it had no affect, and 18% stated it had a negative affect. In support of the view that the activity had a positive affect, one student reported that it "allowed me an opportunity for self advocacy of my learning and contributions. Resulting in a sense of partnership for the learning outcomes and evidence of their completion". A student who believed it had a negative affect noted that, "I felt like I should not be evaluating my own contribution", while another student stated that, "I felt the self-assessment was doing the work for the instructor".

The question on how the activity affected the students learning in the course resulted in 53% stating that it had a positive affect, 6% noting it had a negative affect, and 41% of the participants feeling it had no affect. Comments in support of the activity having a positive affect on their learning included, "it made me look at the rubric and incorporate aspects of excellent performance/participation when generating my postings. e.g. I would see what attributes I could display in a particular post and include them. This would help me be a more valuable contributor and also allowed me to learn/make connections etc." and "[the activity] steered me in the right direction for trying my best to produce quality discussion items and respond to my peers with related and relevant comments". The student who believed the activity had a negative affect on student learning provided a comment that related to a negative team experience.

The majority of students found the self-assessment activity had either a negative affect on their engagement in the course, or no affect at all; with 29% stating it had a negative affect, 47% noting it had no affect, and 24% finding it had a positive affect. A student who thought that it had a negative affect felt that, "trust was lost in the process" and another found it reduced motivation, "I made sure I only completed the minimum required for the assessment and no more, whereas usually I would have been much more involved". Positive comments included, "I do believe that the self-assessment had a very positive affect on my engagement in the course as it provided a way for me to adjust my levels of engagement on an ongoing basis throughout the course" and "[the activity] set the tone for the course, and the self-grading placed emphasis on the task at hand".

In addition to reviewing the participants' written comments in direct support of their Likert scale answers, all qualitative data was analyzed to look for emerging themes. This provided further insights into the value of the self-assessment journal, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of students' experiences.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The following key four themes emerged from analysis of the qualitative data: (1) Accountability (2) Activity Design; (3) Learner Agency; (4) Motivation and are discussed briefly below.

Accountability

Several students commented that through doing self-assessment activity, they felt more accountable to others in the class, as well as believing that others in the class were more accountable to their peers. One student expressed feeling, "accountable for this portion of my learning", while another stated that "overall it was positive as it spurred me to contribute to an articulated standard for excellent participation and allowed me to reflect on and be proud of what I accomplished and learned". One participant spoke of the quality of work, "the contribution portion of the course and the self-assessment made me aware of my responsibility as a student to contribute timely and

adequate responses each week. It did not feel forced, as in assessing yourself afterwards you want to make sure that you are submitting a quality product", and another noted how he/she viewed the link between the mark allocated for the activity, engagement, and accountability, "self-assessment in my opinion holds people accountable for their individual outcomes… the 10% that is accorded to my final grade certainly is incentive enough to gain my engagement as that small amount can help boost my overall grade. I enjoy the interaction and added resources when they are shared, however personally I engage to get the grade!".

Activity Design

The way the mandatory activity was designed featured heavily in the qualitative data, with both positive and negative perspectives of the activity being evident; for example, some students found, "it more difficult to participate in discussion when it is forced rather than sharing related piratical experiences" and that "the forced interaction makes discussion feel very unnatural and has a negative impact on my participation", while others discussed the value of flexibility, stating that, "the option to participate in some or all of the unit insights/discussions allowed me the ability to manage and organize my time more efficiently while balancing home and work responsibilities". Another student commented on the format of the submission, noting that it did "not match my own methodology/technique, so I was forced to reformat my own journal elements into a template - possibly losing some of the immediacy that my own reflections had".

There were several suggestions for improving the assignment, including comments on clarity, timing and format. One student commented on the clarity of the learning objectives and expectations "the learning objectives were very clear as well as the expectations. I was able to met the learning objectives through the assignments and the discussions", another noted that, "a more reflective type of assessment would have been better. It was unclear as to whether we were being graded on our submission of the assessment or the actual contribution". The comments on the timing included the perspective of those who completed the activity at the end of the course stating that, "overall I would say it was a bit of a hindrance to complete towards the end of the course due to workload". Several students commented on the format, as evidenced by, "for me it would have been helpful to submit after each discussion post, or maybe blog/journal about it".

Learner Agency

An additional theme to emerge was that of learner agency. The comment from one of the participants stated how the activity allowed him/her to adjust and adapt as he/she worked through the course, "keeping a journal of my contributions and how they aligned to the learning outcomes in the rubric helped me to make adjustments to my participation and contribution throughout the course". Another student provided a view on how the process of self-assessment supported reflection and allowed insights into the learning process, "it is good to share reflections and explain intent of action as part of the learning process". Yet another student noted how the activity supported purposeful initiative and social participation, "knowing that I was having to complete the self-assessment and, in doing so, would have to provide concrete evidence of the contributions I made, I kept an ongoing journal of my entries throughout the course. This allowed me to view the number of contributions I was making and could see how they were aligning with the rubric provided. This, in turn, gave me a better indication of whether I was on track or if I needed to improve as I was progressing through the course. Based on this, I feel confident in stating that their was a very positive impact on my social participation".

Motivation

Participants discussed their motivation for engaging in activities that result in a contribution to the learning community. Several students found the self-assessment journal had little effect on their motivation, as one student commented, "my engagement level was already high. Possibly because of personal self-reflection on all learning I do. External sharing of the reflection did not change my level of engagement". This was supported by another who stated that, "I engage as much as I can based on other factors; the need to do a self-assessment didn't influence this". Conversely, one student found that, "it helped give me that push to participate or to find that extra time to share in a post", while another student noted that, "it did seem like everyone posted less than in comparable courses". In

addition to the perception that fewer posts were made, one student commented on the quality of the posts, "I did not notice any difference in the overall quality of contributions. The same classmates who have been high quality contributors in the past, were the same high quality contributors when the self-assessment was in place", and, as one student observed, "either people engage or they don't".

Conclusions

As we see students enroll in online courses in greater numbers, the need to explore ways to motivate and engage students online is essential. In this research, we explored the role of a self-assessment tool to enhance graduate students' experience as it related to their learning, engagement, overall experience in an online course. Four key themes emerged from the data: (1) Accountability (2) Activity Design; (3) Learner Agency; (4) Motivation, with a wide variety of observations on each. Consistent with the SoTL approach, moving forward, as we contemplate further development of the activity, we will reflect on the implications of the timeframe in which students have to complete the self-assessment, the clarity of instruction, and the delivery format. In addition, we will consider reminding students to contribute to their self-assessment journal as they work through the course, rather than doing all their work on the activity at the end of the course. We are aware that we need to be explicit in our expectations and provide a solid rational to students, noting why they need to complete the self-assessment, and that there is a need for flexibility with the submission format of the activity. We believe that, while not all students found value in the self-assessment journal, there was sufficient positive perspectives expressed to encourage us to continue including the activity in our courses as we seek to find ways to promote learner engagement, self-advocacy, and build stronger online learning communities.

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