

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0617

Understanding Engagement and Online Peer Assisted Learning with Forums

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

This paper extends the existing literature on the efficacy of online forums to enhance students' engagement, performance, and peer assisted learning by looking at the extent to which Economics students at the University of Warwick value forums organised by topics in a blended learning environment. The analysis will consider forums usage in 2020/21 for a core 2nd year module, where forums were created for students on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to share doubts/problems with the learning material and provide mutual help to enhance Peer Assisted Learning (PAL).

The paper will provide a contribution to the literature by:

1. Analysing students' engagement in forums using a Revealed Preferences Approach and considering a) how students' characteristics (e.g., socio-economic and A-level performance) affect students' engagement with forums, and b) how this links to students' performance.
2. Testing different learning dimensions (e.g., participative, social, and interactive) in the context of acquiring online transferable skills via Henri's hierarchical classification system for Online Peer Assisted Learning (OPAL – see McLuckie and Topping, 2004).

Paper:

During the pandemic, student engagement has been a crucial and critical aspect of our teaching and learning delivery. It was hard to replicate something closer to a 'normal' student experience and even more difficult to create opportunities for them to meet other peers, and work with them to support each other. In a subject like Economics, this is particularly important since students are trained not only to address important economics questions in terms of analytical models, but also to develop written and oral communication skills to be able to construct and convey arguments based on evidence and demonstrate practical and critical reasoning in written and oral communications. Participation and engagement help to imbibe and improve such skills.

Online forums represent a good resource to trigger peer discussion and peer review and can play a key role in improving students' communication skills (de Lima et al., 2019).

There is a vast literature which explores the efficacy of online forums and discussion boards on student learning and skill enhancement. Lyndon and Hale (2014), for example, assess the impact of using online forums for students studying a course in Early Childhood Studies. Here, discussion forums were mainly set up in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) -i.e., Moodle -by topic, though students could benefit from a general forum for more general questions about the module. At the end of the course, students were asked to complete a questionnaire to assess the usefulness and effectiveness of the Moodle forums along with providing some qualitative feedback on how forums affected the students' learning experience. Lyndon and Hale (ibid) find that forums by topic not only generated active participation and engagement, but also piqued student interests and commitment to the course. Qualitative feedback also revealed that students' benefits included engaging with peer assisted learning and developing a sense of community. Similarly, Harmon and Tomolonis (2019) analyse the efficacy of forums using two different platforms: Facebook and the traditional Course Management System. Contrary to expectations, the authors find that discussion forums on the traditional system led to higher students' engagement and performance, while students using social media forums engaged less with the course material leading to lower course performance. Harmon and Tomolonis (2019) use the total number of words posted in forums as a measure of student engagement. The empirical analysis reveals that posts on the traditional forums were longer, more thought out, and reflecting more preparation and effort on behalf of the students. By contrast, the use of forums on Facebook led to considerably less student engagement.

This paper will extend the existing literature by looking at the extent to which Economics students value forums organised by topics in the VLE. The analysis will consider forums usage in 2020/21 for a core 2nd year module, where forums were created for students on Moodle to share doubts/problems with the learning material and provide mutual help to enhance Peer Assisted Learning (PAL). The study will be focused on a module with forums organised by topics as, according to previous research (see e.g., Lyndon and Hale, 2014 and DeLeng et al., 2006), students are less likely to engage with general forums.

The literature on the efficacy of online forums to enhance students' engagement, performance, and peer assisted learning seems to be inconclusive especially when considering hybrid learning methods (see e.g., Staveley-O'Connor, 2015). Therefore, further research will help to shed light on how forums affect the students' learning experience in a blended learning environment. This may have important consequences not only for reshaping the future of Higher Education, but also to foster students' engagement and participation in future.

The paper will provide a contribution to the literature by:

1. Analysing students' engagement in forums using a Revealed Preferences Approach. The assumption here is that students' usage of forums will also reveal how much they value them for their learning experience (see e.g., Elliott and Neal, 2016). Students' engagement will be measured by observing data access frequency of forums by topics. A natural follow up on this analysis will be to consider a) how students' characteristics (e.g., socio-economic and A-level performance) affect students' engagement with forums, and b) how this links to students' performance. Although there is a broad literature on the benefits and pitfalls associated to the use of online forums, only a few papers look at the determinants of students' engagement with forums (see e.g., Staveley-O'Connor, 2015) and how this translates into

students' performance.

2. Testing different learning dimensions (e.g., participative, social, and interactive) in the context of acquiring online transferable skills via Henri's hierarchical classification system for Online Peer Assisted Learning (OPAL – see McLuckie and Topping, 2004). Different learning dimensions will then be linked to students' characteristics.

References:

References

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