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Actively promoting student engagement within an online environment: Developing and implementing a signature subject on 'Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality'

Gillian Fletcher

La Trobe University, g.fletcher@latrobe.edu.au

Gary W. Dowsett

La Trobe University, g.dowsett@latrobe.edu.au

Lilian Austin

La Trobe University, l.austin@latrobe.edu.au

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Actively promoting student engagement within an online environment: Developing and implementing a signature subject on 'Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality'

Abstract

La Trobe University is committed to improving the first year experience, and to developing its online teaching portfolio in response to increasing student demand. This article will acknowledge that these two objectives will remain contradictory if online learning systems are used predominantly as repositories of information with little thought given to their specific pedagogic possibilities. The article will then present a case study of an 'Signature Subject' that was developed to actively promote learner-material, learner-learner and learner-lecturer engagement in an entirely online environment, through use of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Background to subject development will be provided, followed by discussion of challenges faced, responses to challenges and outcomes in terms of student response. The article will conclude by arguing that, as universities increase their use of online learning due to the changing university environment, this does not have to lead to reduced student engagement or poorer first year experiences.

Keywords

Online, active learning, synchronous, sexuality

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

A student's first-year experience at university can make or break her or his academic future. As noted by Hillman (2005, p. 2), it represents "a significant transition point, one that may affect the development of attitudes towards continuing learning at tertiary education and beyond".

The *Design for Learning* (DfL) White Paper, circulated throughout La Trobe University in 2009, noted that "while several other comparable Australian universities have long focused institutional attention and resources on the first-year experience, La Trobe has not" (La Trobe University 2009, p. 11). The acknowledgement by the White Paper of the need to address this gap as a matter of priority concurs with contemporary research into student first-year experience at all Australian universities, which concluded that: "[d]uring the next decade, the first year will be a critical time for retention and for establishing sound patterns of study and academic engagement, perhaps even more so than now" (James, Krause & Jennings 2010, p. 82).

Student engagement and online learning: a potentially challenging combination

The need to improve student first-year student experience underpins much of the *DfL* project. It is widely accepted (as reflected in the quote above) that *engagement* is a key factor in students' experience and achievement throughout their university life, and particularly in the first year (Lysaght 2007; James, Krause & Jennings 2010; Hillman 2005). As noted by Krause and Coates (2008), the topic of student engagement has been of increasing interest to educational researchers. What constitutes and promotes student engagement is not universally agreed; yet there is agreement on certain core elements, namely, the need for active learning, collaboration and interaction. Coates (Coates 2007, p. 125) offers the following set of key measures of online engagement for teachers to use: "online learning systems in pedagogically effective ways"; using "online systems in collaborative work with their peers"; "contact with academic staff online" and "experience[ing] a range of salient interactions with others". These have salience for this project even though the context for Coates' work is that which is commonly called blended learning where online learning is used in addition to, for instance, lectures, rather than as the sole source of student interaction with the learning environment. It can be argued that student (or learner) interaction occurs in three sets of core relationships: learner-material; learner-lecturer; and learner-learner. Of the three, Johnson argued more than 30 years ago that possibly the key interaction variable was that of learner-learner (Johnson 1981). This is also the interaction that relies most heavily on a subject's pedagogic intent, in that if learner-learner interaction is not built into a subject from the beginning, it is the least likely form of interaction to emerge.

Yet the university environment is changing in a way that presents a major challenge for the promotion, and support, of student engagement and interaction (for all three sets of relationships). First, students are spending less and less time on campus as they struggle to balance the demands of study with economic survival (James, Krause & Jennings 2010). Second, and related to the previous point, students are increasingly seeking online learning opportunities (Walker, Voce & Ahmed 2012). Yet historically learning management systems have been most commonly used as little more than repositories of information, accessed by students on an individual basis (Brennan 2003)—the focus has been on what Graham (2006, p. 5) defined as 'learner-material interaction'. Materials are deposited online to be accessed by students as and when they choose, a model criticised by Lietzau and Mann (2009) as being an 'asynchronous box' that needs to be broken out of if students are to be actively engaged in learning *together*, through involvement in the full range of potential learning relationships previously outlined. With first year undergraduate students who,

as it is, often struggle with universities' requirements for greater self-directed learning, the risk of lack of engagement in learning relationships is heightened and likely to lead to disengagement and poor learning outcomes (James, Krause & Jennings 2010).

Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality: a case study

This article reports on development of a new Signature Subject for first-year undergraduate students at La Trobe University that actively promotes student engagement within an online environment. The fully online subject, *Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality*, was developed by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (which sits within the Faculty of Health Sciences), but is available to all first-year students from all five University faculties and six campuses. Full details of the program of that research centre are available at www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs. A short background to the subject's development will be provided, followed by discussion of the challenges of promoting active engagement and interaction within an online space, the responses developed to these challenges, and results arising.

As noted, La Trobe University began the *DfL* project aware of having somewhat fallen behind other Australian universities in paying attention to student first-year experience. At the same time, the University was also aware of having fallen behind in online learning. In 2009, then University Vice-Chancellor Professor Paul Johnson published a *Strategic Options* paper that warned La Trobe University was missing "a lack of attractive programs offered in a flexible manner" (Johnson 2009, p. 3 & 6), with the lack of online delivery identified as a particular issue. A similar argument line was made in the University's *Strategic Plan 2008–2012* (La Trobe University 2007). Good online learning requires greater pedagogical consideration than simply taking a subject that works in face-to-face mode and adapting it for delivery via the internet. Attwell (2004, p. 4) argues that: "E-learning does not merely replace or replicate traditional classroom (or work based) learning but poses new challenges for how learning can be effectively facilitated and managed". *Design for Learning* made the following, related recommendation: that "the University ensure that the development of teaching and learning technologies and learning spaces, both real and virtual, be undertaken in a co-ordinated and learning-centred way" (La Trobe University 2009, p. 14).

The development of *Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality* was intended as one response to the need to improve online learning opportunities, at the same time as enhancing the first-year experience. The University asked each of its Faculties to develop such a Signature Subject, to 'flagship' the Faculty's strengths and foci. The Faculty of Health Sciences' decision to ask the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) to develop the Signature Subject was a bold one. First, ARCSHS is a research centre with a postgraduate program, but rarely in its 20-year-history has it been involved in undergraduate teaching. Second, the centre's interdisciplinary focus on Critical Sexuality Studies as a well-recognised and internationally important field of academic study has not been a 'traditional' focus of Health Sciences' undergraduate educational programs. The Faculty is better known for training health professionals and public health practitioners.

The University document supporting the creation of Signature Subjects recommended that subject areas should be interdisciplinary and have broad appeal. As our subject description notes, sexuality affects everyone and needs to be studied as a culturally understood phenomenon that encompasses issues of class, power and gender (in other words, using a Critical Sexuality Studies approach). What better topic for a Signature Subject? Moreover, ARCSHS may be predominantly a research

centre, but it has a long history of teaching short courses and of providing tailored capacity-building work in an international development context, all with a strong focus on sexuality. The Centre has a strong track record of attracting postgraduate students. As of 2012, the Centre was home to 24 doctoral students, 11 of whom were international students. All of these students came to ARCSHS because of its reputation as one of the world's leading sexuality studies research centres.

ARCSHS' educational credentials include having partnered with the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society to develop *Advancing Sexuality Studies: a short course on sexuality theory and research methodologies*. The short course, a world-first, is developed for teaching face-to-face and is intended to develop skills in sexuality studies among developing-country postgraduate-level researchers, activists and academics. The course takes an active learning approach, consistent with Ramsden's (2003) 'deep' approach to learning in which participants are challenged to demonstrate creative engagement and understanding of course material rather than simply 'regurgitate' facts. The Ford Foundation-funded short course seeks to engage 'higher order' thinking, following Lewis and Smith's (1993, p. 136) definition of higher order thinking as incorporating "problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, and decision making". This approach leads to a discussion of the first—and possibly greatest—of the challenges faced in development of the subject.

Learning about online learning possibilities

When asked to take on the task of designing and implementing the online Signature Subject, we balked at first. Was it *possible* to embed active learning successfully in a subject to be offered entirely online? Our concerns were exacerbated by initial Faculty assumptions about, and therefore their preference for, an online subject that was delivered only with materials stored online for downloading by students working within their own personal timeframe—the 'asynchronous box' previously discussed (Lietzau & Mann 2009). Our preference, on the other hand, was for a subject that was able to provide 'active' space to enable emergence of engagement and interaction (which, we believed, required synchronous sessions, with everyone online at the same time). We were told that online subjects were attractive to students *because* they were not timetabled, and therefore could be fitted around students' other commitments (including both educational and work commitments) as long as minimum required tasks were completed within the overall timeframe of a semester. The impression was of online learning being seen as the 'poor cousin' of face-to-face teaching; something that was used merely as a way of meeting course load requirements without students having to spend more time on campus, rather than as a pedagogically attractive and valid way of learning and interacting.

We argued that a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous sessions could be used to embed learner–learner interaction within the structure of the subject itself (this is, of course, not an automatic result of using synchronous sessions; the issue of planning session content and process will be discussed later). The question was: would students be interested in an online subject that blended synchronous and asynchronous sessions, given what we know about the time and work pressures faced by today's students? Would the benefits outweigh the perceived costs, in terms of a certain lack of flexibility in timing? The available evidence suggested that the answer would be 'yes' (Annetta et al. 2008; Attwell 2004; Graham 2006; Durkee et al. 2009); so the Faculty approved the development of a subject with six synchronous and seven asynchronous sessions. This led to the immediate challenge of timetabling. Faculty administrators had never included an online subject in the timetable, and questions regarding the process for such timetabling were met with the response: 'We never timetable online subjects; it's not necessary'. Eventually, a one-hour

per week timeslot was found and the subject was added to the semester timetable, and we had to quickly learn about the technologies used by the University for development of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions.

To complicate matters further, the University was in the process of changing its learning management system (LMS). Semester 1, 2011 would see the LMS switch to use of online program *Moodle 2.0*. La Trobe was leading the way here, as the first Australian University to adopt *Moodle 2.0* (which was still in the process of final development); this meant that not only was it a new system, but it was also one that had not been used elsewhere and did not have tried and tested training materials. La Trobe's internal trainers supporting teaching staff were faced with 'training by doing'; having to develop training materials for others at the same time as they became familiar with the technology themselves. In hindsight, it was probably the best time at which to be developing a new online course for delivery in Semester 2, 2011. There was a sense of exploration of possibilities, rather than a pre-determined template for 'how to'. Through involvement in the early *Moodle 2.0* training sessions, the first co-author (as the subject developer) was also fortunate enough to make contact with trainers from the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Centre and with a staff member from a different Faculty (third co-author) who had extensive knowledge of the possibilities available for online teaching, who had run synchronous online sessions using the program *Elluminate Live!* (now called *Blackboard Collaborate*), and was generous enough to provide informal, mentoring support to the first author.

Interaction in action: an overview of the structure, processes, and outcomes of Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality

From the beginning, Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality was developed to make use of the possibilities for interaction that online learning technology offers, rather than being developed in the same way as a face-to-face subject then shoehorned to 'fit' online. The interactive possibilities of *Moodle*, *Elluminate Live!* and a Web 2.0 collaborative program called *VoiceThread* (used to build online image collections that can then be annotated with text, audio and drawing) were exploited to facilitate the three core interaction relationships in the following ways.

Promoting learner–material interaction

As already noted, much online learning relies mainly on learner–material interaction without connecting this to the other core interaction relationships. For Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality, efforts were made to ensure that where possible learner–material interaction was connected to other forms of interaction (learner–learner and/or learner–lecturer).

The first decision taken was to limit the number of key materials provided (although additional materials were provided for students who wanted to extend their study). Second, it was decided to make sure all materials were easily accessible online (either via a 'hot link' to the relevant University library entry, or via direct link to the materials where copyright laws allowed). Third, all efforts were made to ensure that all materials used had 'life' beyond being read, watched or listened to. The materials provided had to be engaged with by students throughout a range of learning activities in order to undertake other subject tasks. This occurred either through linking the materials to a required weekly discussion posting (thereby enabling both learner–material and learner–learner interaction, see below), the *Elluminate Live!* sessions held during synchronous weeks (again, see below), or to *Moodle*-based activities using the program's various functions. Particular use was made of the *Moodle* lesson activity, which allows the lecturer to develop online,

open or closed questions related to any reading. Where closed questions were set, *Moodle* provided students with the correct answer at the end of each attempt at a lesson question. Where open questions were set, lecturer responses to these—and to summaries plus discussion of student responses to closed questions—provided material for the lecturer’s weekly feedback post (see Learner–lecturer interaction, below). Further reading materials were provided on the subject home page for those students who wished to go beyond the minimum set readings.

Materials provided ranged from more traditional, academic articles (e.g. Gayle Rubin’s seminal work from the early 1980s, ‘Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality’ (Rubin, [1984] 2007) to extracts from The Virginitiy Project blog (run by Kate Munro; http://virginitiyproject.typepad.com/the_virginitiy_project/), a Robbie Williams and Gary Barlow music video and *New York Times* fashion articles. The *VoiceThread* technology that students were asked to use to complete their first (group) assignment was used initially in a scaffolded, group collaboration activity; thus introducing students to both the technology and the type of academic response required for later assessable work. They were provided with a selection of (non-copyright) images related to women’s sexuality, and asked to interact both with the images and with each other’s responses (see Learner–learner interaction, below). Flickr Commons, The New York Public Library (accessible via VoiceThread) and Sociological Images (<http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/>) provided access to a wealth of inspiring and thought-provoking images, for example the following poster from WWII:



Figure 1: Example of World War 2 poster

The subject home page was also regularly updated, with new images and/or links to relevant newspaper reports provided in order to stimulate discussion, reflection and debate. In this way it was hoped that the students' interest would be piqued to return on a regular basis to a dynamic and ever-changing learning space.

Learner-learner interaction

Students were required to make a weekly discussion post on a set topic, linked to the material provided. (A total of 10% of the overall marks were allocated for making one weekly discussion post and also for attending synchronous sessions.) Every post made was sent out to all students, as well as to the first author (subject lecturer and designer), second author (subject coordinator) and the subject tutor in a bid to create a sense of ongoing conversation.

Initially, many students simply made their post without reference to the contribution of other students. However, as the weeks progressed, the discussion post conversations developed, with students replying to each other and building on (or refuting) each other's arguments. Given the subject's content matter, it was not difficult to find attractive discussion topics. For example, Week One's topic related to *The Heterosexual Questionnaire* (Rochlin, [1995] 2004 p. 136), which asks such questions as: 'Ever stopped to wonder whether or not heterosexuality is "just a phase" that people might "grow out of"?' By Week Seven, students were sharing (and analysing) their own experiences of school-based sexuality education, in response to questions that interrogated reading material provided.

The use of *VoiceThread*—both to provide students with material that they were required to respond to, and as a group-work tool—further enhanced learner-learner interaction. In Week Three, students were provided with a lecturer-developed *VoiceThread* entitled *Women's Sexuality: Site of Pleasure and Threat* and required to add their comments to the *VoiceThread*. Again, while some students made 'solo' posts, the majority referenced or responded to each other's comments on the images and related text (including the image shown above). Later, as part of their first assessed task, students worked in groups to develop their own collaborative *VoiceThread* on one of several optional topics (including 'Sexuality and Music; Sexuality, Fashion and the Body'; and 'Sexuality and the Age of Consent'). Students agreed on a topic, then worked together to select relevant images, and finally to comment on the images in a coherent way. All this was mediated online using a range of technologies. The beauty of this online technology also meant that it was clear which students had contributed most to developing comments on and analysis of the images, as each student had to sign in to work on the *VoiceThread*.

Learner-learner interaction was most obviously enhanced through the use of synchronous sessions, with everyone expected to be online and logged-in to the same *Illuminate Live!* interactive space at the same time. As indicated, 10% of marks were provided for participation in synchronous sessions and to making a weekly post. Losing these marks was not a sufficient disincentive to ensure that each student attended every *Illuminate Live!* Session. However, the synchronous sessions drew between 56% and 77% of all students (except in Week One, which had lower take-up due to enrolment processes and initial technological glitches). The 56% attendance occurred in the final week, which fell within the University examination period. *Illuminate Live!* attendance can be ascertained through a recording of each session and by reviewing sign-ins.

Synchronous sessions were deliberately spaced throughout the subject (the first two weeks were synchronous, as were the fourth—the start of a new topic—the ninth, 11th and final sessions). Every synchronous session was delivered by first co-author, supported by a tutor and with

contributions from the second co-author at the start and end of the subject. The third co-author provided technical advice and encouragement. In synchronous weeks, sessions comprised: lecture material illustrated by *PowerPoint* slides (the lectures were divided into sections of 15 minutes each); live group work using online breakout rooms and virtual whiteboards that students could draw, type or write on (with outcomes of this group work brought back into the ‘main’ room for discussion); live chat, which was a popular way for students to comment, seek clarification or contribute to discussions; instant polling (with results immediately published to the whiteboard); and more. Throughout these sessions, students were regularly asked to use the *Illuminate Live!* emoticons—which expressed confusion or happiness, or allowed the student to give a ‘thumbs-up’—to help gauge their response to the lecture material. Students were also able to ask questions by simply ‘putting their hand up’ (another emoticon option). Some students even used *Illuminate Live!* by themselves (outside of the synchronous session slot) to negotiate their *VoiceThread* group work assignments.

Students’ comfort with online technology, and their willingness to use it to interact with each other, were clear when after the first week they established their own Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality *Facebook* page. The page was used by students to discuss activities, raise and answer questions, and possibly to chat about staff (we decided against joining the page).

Learner–lecturer interaction

The lecturer involvement in the *Illuminate Live!* sessions is described above. In addition, students were provided with regular feedback on activities undertaken during the week, which included a summary and analysis of their discussion posts, synchronous session topics and outputs, and responses to Moodle-based lessons provided during asynchronous weeks. Further, Moodle allows for students to message the lecturer directly as and if questions arise during the course. Students used this option mainly when seeking clarification on an assignment task, asking for an assignment extension, or notifying an absence from a synchronous session.

The student response

The initial fears that students would not be keen to sign up for an online subject that was (at least in part) timetabled soon proved baseless. The first offering of Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality attracted a total of 101 first year students (post-census date) from La Trobe’s Melbourne, Bendigo and Albury-Wodonga campuses. Most of the students were from the Faculty of Health Sciences but the subject also attracted students from journalism and the Bachelors of Arts, Science, Social Science and Law degrees. There was a very low attrition rate, with just three students remaining enrolled but not participating at all. Two students suspended for personal reasons unconnected with the subject. Thus the vast majority of enrolled students completed. In addition the quality of work produced by many of the students increased significantly throughout the course, culminating in a final essay for which 25 students received 70% or above. This essay required a degree of sophisticated social science thinking not often required of first year Health Sciences students (the single largest cohort in the subject’s student body).

As noted, the majority of students signed-in to synchronous sessions and, during the semester, several students expressed their appreciation of the ways in which video links, web pages and images were built into the asynchronous sessions. Discussion forums attracted very frank and thoughtful posts, bringing together students’ personal experiences and emotional responses with the material that they were asked to read (or watch) and consider. It was also striking how

respectful of each other the students were, as they responded to each other's posts. (The need for good online etiquette was stressed in the first week.)

Responses to the subject's evaluation survey are confidential, which is a limitation in that no specific data can be provided to support our claim that the subject evaluated well. There is a clear need for research into student experience of this, and other, La Trobe University online subjects. We will be pursuing effective subject evaluation in future years, and regret that there was neither the time, nor resources, available to successfully build this into the first iteration of the course. What we can say, however, is that the majority of those students who provided comments as part of the standard University evaluation survey were enthusiastic about the high level of interaction throughout the subject. Comments were made regarding the importance of the online sessions in facilitating understanding of materials provided. Some spoke of how much they enjoyed hearing the opinions and experiences of other students, both during synchronous sessions and through the discussion forums.

During the Semester, many students took time to state that the subject was, in fact, their favourite. Of course, the popularity of the subject lies in part in the content matter. However, it can be argued that the mode of delivery enabled discussion of the subject matter in a way that face-to-face delivery may not have done, because it is likely that being in the same physical space might have increased student embarrassment and reticence to participate. Typing a comment to an electronic discussion about one's own response to a sexuality issue is one thing; uttering the comment aloud in a large class is something else entirely.

Conclusion

The development of *Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality* was time-consuming, challenging and occasionally frustrating. There were technical, administrative, and lecturing hitches; for example *Moodle* activities that had taken hours to create had to be re-created because we later discovered a more appropriate tool in which to build an activity. Sometimes our voices on the synchronous sessions sounded like 'androids', or so we were reliably informed by students. Some students used *Elluminate Live!* drawing tools to add certain unwanted representations of body parts to the whiteboard (which alerted the teaching team to the need to actively manage the tools in *Elluminate Live!*).

Overall, however, the design of this subject demonstrates that it is possible to incorporate key elements that promote student engagement (active learning, collaboration and interaction (student-material, student-student, student-teacher) in curriculum. At the time of writing, the 2012 iteration of the subject is well underway. The subject was over-subscribed, students continue to respond well to its innovative use of materials and synchronous/asynchronous activity blend, and they are themselves contributing to subject development through continual identification of relevant websites, news stories, videos and other materials.

The lessons learnt from *Contemporary Issues in Sex and Sexuality*, and demonstrated student satisfaction with the course, will inform the DfL project as it continues to review and overhaul the University's curriculum. In addition, the value and innovation of the subject has been acknowledged by the Curriculum Teaching and Learning Centre, which has identified it as an exemplar of online learning (intended to encourage other University staff to engage with online active learning, thereby supporting the DfL project further).

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