



# STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS

## **A Curriculum Design Collaboration**

### *Enhancing Engagement & Attendance in Introduction to Academic Practice & Critical Thinking for Academic and Professional Development*

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**CETI**

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**A STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS PROJECT**

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER 

## **1. Where did the inspiration to do the project come from?**

Our inspiration stemmed from our desire to create an exceptional learning environment, at the core of which lie high levels of student engagement. Engagement is a multifaceted concept that encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioural factors influencing learning (Foster & Ambrose, 2023). We perceive engagement as the active participation of students in activities and situations that contribute to effective and superior learning experiences (Bryson, 2014). Beyond fostering positive learning experiences, we firmly believe that student engagement correlates positively with other crucial learning attributes, including increased retention rates, heightened socialization, and better workforce preparation.

Throughout the academic year 2022-2023, we implemented a range of strategies to enhance engagement and attendance within the modules 'Introduction to Academic Practice' and 'Critical Thinking for Academic and Professional Development.' These modules are designed for foundation-level students across diverse subject areas, including Business Management, Arts and Media, Computer Science, Life Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities, as well as Law. The strategies we adopted encompassed frequent communication, multimodal learning resources accessible on Blackboard, interactive in-class tasks, assessment methods conducive to learning, and content tailored to the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds. Despite our dedicated efforts to cultivate an engaging learning environment, we observed a noticeable decline in both face-to-face attendance and overall engagement with the two modules compared to previous academic years. Recognizing the significance of these modules in our students' learning journey, we embarked on a quest to comprehend our students' interaction with the learning and teaching sessions, as well as the course content. Our objective was to identify potential barriers hindering their engagement and to formulate strategies to address these challenges. By doing so, we aim to refine our modules and provide the necessary support to empower students to overcome these obstacles effectively.

## **2. What did you set out to achieve?**

Working in partnership enabled us to collect essential information on engagement in the modules Introduction to Academic Practice and Critical Thinking for Academic and

Professional Development. Through this research project, we collected data to gain a better understanding of how students engage with the two modules with the aim to use this understanding to make improvements in the curriculum and support our students. Drawing upon relevant literature suggesting that emotional, sociocultural, cognitive, and behavioural factors affect student engagement (e.g., Barkley & Major, 2020; Kahu, 2013) and to facilitate the process of data collection and analysis we collected data on the following four dimensions of engagement:

1. Emotional engagement
2. Sociocultural engagement
3. Cognitive engagement
4. Behavioural engagement

We collected data through two focus group discussions led by student partners, followed by a questionnaire survey that allowed us to delve deeper into our primary findings.

A summary of our main findings in relation to the areas of engagement described above is presented in the following sections.

## **2.1. Emotional Engagement**

Within the realm of emotional engagement, various facets came into focus. In assessing student interest levels during classes, we investigated the impact of tools like menti.com, icebreakers, and group work. Both quantitative data and feedback from focus groups revealed that these tools rendered classes more captivating and engrossing.

Turning to student stress levels, it was evident that factors such as teaching staff and public transport disruptions, as well as early class timings failed to alleviate stress. This observation was substantiated by data gleaned from both focus groups and questionnaires. However, in-class interactions were generally perceived positively, contributing to emotional well-being.

Furthermore, our exploration unveiled other emotional determinants influencing student engagement. Challenges related to referencing and English language proficiency emerged as key factors impacting stress levels and emotional well-being. These findings shed light on the

importance of fostering emotional engagement in educational settings to create a more conducive and supportive learning environment. Such learning environments would lead to positive emotions which influence students' efforts to complete learning activities and the extent and character of their learning (Kahu et al., 2020), ultimately increasing academic achievement (MacCann et al., 2011).

## **2.2. Sociocultural Engagement**

Regarding in-class interactions, various activities like team-building exercises and icebreakers contributed to creating an inclusive environment appreciated by students. Face-to-face classes were preferred by our research participants as they fostered collaboration, debate, and a sense of inclusivity. Notably, these classes were instrumental in nurturing friendships that extended beyond the confines of the classroom, enhancing networking both within and outside the academic setting. Networking inside and outside the class proved advantageous for engagement, leading to respectful and kind attitudes among students. Forming new friendships was common during breaks, and students missed this aspect during strike days. While our data imply that relationships did not significantly affect physical attendance, the questionnaire indicated that attendance could be affected by personal circumstances like work or family commitments.

During instances of strikes, students found Blackboard and Panopto essential for maintaining engagement with the learning materials. However, feedback from focus groups shows that student participants missed the face-to-face environment suggesting that online classes should only be used as an alternative for better engagement. In-class tasks positively affected engagement levels, with students generally reporting positive interactions with lecturers as well as ample opportunities to ask questions and engage in discussions. While networking beyond the classroom was facilitated through tools like Blackboard and emails, it was noted that not all students were initially well-versed in utilizing features like the messaging function on Blackboard.

Another sociocultural factor impacting engagement included competence in using the English language in an academic environment – this was highlighted by non-native speakers in our focus groups who experienced introversion and anxiety. Nonetheless, the content covered in

the 'Introduction to Academic Practice' and 'Critical Thinking for Academic and Professional Development' modules was instrumental in providing invaluable support in such scenarios.

Finally, it was reported that lecturers' assistance during times of confusion or insecurity with assignments had a positive impact on engagement levels.

### **2.3. Cognitive Engagement**

The importance of discussion, questions, and dialogue during class time is evident in literature on fostering student engagement and promoting active learning (e.g. Heilporn et al., 2021). This was evident in our data. As mentioned by one of our focus group participants, engagement increased when they were “able to ask questions and answer them because [they] have knowledge of the topic and feel confident”. This highlights the significance of creating an inclusive learning environment that encourages active participation and promotes students' confidence in expressing their thoughts. It is promising that our data show student satisfaction with the availability of opportunities to engage in discussion, which facilitated their active involvement and deeper understanding of the subject matter.

The insights from both the focus group and questionnaire underscore the importance of task and activity choice in enhancing student engagement during classes. It is promising that our questionnaire data showed that in-class tasks in both modules positively influenced students' engagement levels. Teamwork tasks appeared as an effective strategy, as mentioned in the focus group, highlighting its role in fostering collaboration and interaction among students. Furthermore, brainstorming tasks were highlighted as highly engaging and beneficial for students' assignments.

Our data also suggest that assessment practices play a crucial role in promoting cognitive engagement. Early feedback and clear explanations of assessment requirements were identified as essential requirements by the focus group. However, cultural differences were noted as factors that could influence students' perspectives on assignments, further emphasizing the need for inclusive and diverse teaching and assessment approaches. Another interesting finding in relation to how assessment practices may affect cognitive engagement is that students who did not speak English as a first language reported challenges with grammar in assignments.

Confidence in using English within an academic context was also intertwined with levels of engagement. What is promising is that our data highlight content from both modules as aiding language development, therefore supporting our students in their academic journey. Considering our data alongside data reported in other research showing a correlation between self-efficacy and cognitive engagement (e.g. Kahu et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2006), we feel that our student engagement levels would be heightened if they were more confident in using the English language in an academic setting.

Blackboard and other learning tools were highly valued by students as helpful resources for cognitive engagement, providing easy access to course materials and recorded classes. Interactive learning tools like Kahoot, Mentimeter and Padlet were found to enhance intellectual engagement in classes and students positively endorsed them in both their questionnaire responses and focus group discussion.

Furthermore, the duration of lessons emerged as a noteworthy factor impacting cognitive engagement. Our data indicated that longer sessions had an adverse effect on engagement levels.

#### **2.4. Behavioural Engagement**

Attendance in classes was subject to various influencing factors, as unveiled through insights gathered from both focus group discussions and questionnaire responses. Notably, classes for the same module that were timetabled across different campuses exerted a detrimental effect on physical attendance due to the geographical distance between classrooms. Strikes, whether related to transportation disruption or faculty actions, also had a significant impact on attendance. What is interesting is that our participants suggested that offering online classes during strikes could have improved attendance rates. Furthermore, our student participants expressed a desire for the flexibility to choose between physical and online attendance. As one of our focus group participants put it, “in real time, it would have been wonderful to have had the option to have dialled in remotely as well just as a one off, not as a habit” because “the problem with [watching recorded content is that] you've missed the moment and you can't pose the question that you need to ask right then and there”. Additionally, mental health was raised

as an important consideration for attendance; this underscored a need for enhanced information and support in this domain to ensure students' well-being and sustained engagement. Lastly, the timing of classes surfaced as another salient point affecting attendance rates. Early morning classes were met with limited acceptance by our student participants, potentially accounting for the observed lower attendance rates within such sessions in 2022-2023.

Additional behavioural factors affecting engagement included teachers' use of tasks in the classes, such as discussions, which served to stimulate active participation and sustained attention. These tasks supported engagement by making classes interesting and useful for students as well as by facilitating communication. Communication beyond the classroom was also facilitated through social media, such as WhatsApp groups, and was reported as beneficial for engagement. Students found these platforms beneficial, underscoring their positive impact on engagement levels.

Regarding engagement with Blackboard, students found the platform to be a valuable resource for physical engagement, especially during strikes or when missing lessons. Note-taking and reading announcements were highlighted as popular behavioural engagement options by our questionnaire participants. Other tools like utilizing reading lists, incorporating Google Scholar and using the 'messages' function on Blackboard, despite being discussed as helpful in our focus groups, were not as popular with information on the Blackboard pages of the two modules and content on slides being preferred. Given that the 'messages' function was discussed as being helpful in the focus groups, we feel that this tool, alongside others mentioned above, should be more actively promoted to our students.

Lastly, discussions on physical student engagement also brought to light the challenge of Wi-Fi connectivity issues. Notably, participants highlighted the library as a reliable source for those who struggled with internet connectivity.

### **3.How did students and staff work together on this project?**

In order to collaborate on this project, we used a variety of techniques.

The team members would meet online almost every week for approximately 3 months at certain times. Following each meeting, a follow-up email was circulated describing the tasks that needed to be finished before the next meeting and summarising the topics discussed. Our meetings opened-up fruitful conversations in relation to our project and we consider these invaluable for the direction our research has taken. In addition to having this discussion, we also used our meetings to identify tasks that needed to be finished before the following meeting and, in some cases, to assign these tasks to individual team members. We feel that we were able to stay organised thanks to this, and the reminders about upcoming project deadlines made time management easier.

In addition to using Blackboard Collaborate for our meetings, we used shared documents to collaborate on brainstorming, organising our project, and working our findings. These included documents that we co-created using Padlet and a shared folder. Additionally, we decided that having the student partners oversee the focus group meetings would be advantageous for our research. We collaborated to develop questions for these focus groups and make sure that everything would go according to plan because of this.

To sustain communication and facilitate coordination, the student participants established a WhatsApp group chat—an excellent means of maintaining close contact throughout the project duration.

#### **4. What kind of impact do you anticipate that your work may have on learning and teaching going forward?**

The impact of our findings from this project is multifaceted and holds significance across various dimensions.

Firstly, the findings are important to the teaching team as they equip us with insights to foster interactive and enriching learning environments for our forthcoming students. By enhancing their learning experiences, we aim to improve student experience at foundation level. In practical terms, our findings are already being integrated or will be incorporated into our preparations for the upcoming academic year. For example, we are working on making changes and improvements to our assessment tasks and marking rubrics, on making changes to the



design and content of our Blackboard sites, on finding ways to promote the use of engaging learning tools in our future classes, and on creating an engaging learning environment for our future students.

Secondly, the impact extends to the student partners and participants themselves. Their involvement in academic research has provided them with a platform to develop confidence and communication skills. This experience is undoubtedly instrumental in their personal growth.

Thirdly, building upon the productive discussions and valuable experiences gained through our collaboration with students, we are hoping to engage in additional partnership projects in future. It is our strong belief that students are active collaborators in shaping and revolutionizing learning experiences, and this motivates us to seek further opportunities to work with them in partnership research projects.

Fourthly our findings seem to support current wider discussions on student engagement suggesting that student engagement is strongly linked to individual students' unique personalities and circumstances (e.g. Kahu et al., 2020).

Lastly, our findings hold significance for the broader academic community. They offer a unique insight into the student experience, articulated directly by the students themselves. By comprehending the constraints and barriers faced by foundation-level students, we are empowered to formulate strategies that provide effective support, thereby enriching the academic journey.

Guided by our findings, we present a summarized collection of key recommendations aimed at enhancing student engagement on the next page (Table 1).

**Table 1. Elevating Student Engagement: Key Recommendations**

**Timetabling Recommendations**

1. **Location Consistency:** Schedule lectures and seminars on the same campus location.
2. **Late Start:** Timetable classes to start later in the day, avoiding early mornings.
3. **Remote Attendance Option:** Provide the option for remote class attendance when in-person attendance isn't possible due to exceptional reasons.
4. **Breaks and Shorter Classes:** Avoid long face-to-face sessions by offering breaks or shorter classes.

**General Recommendations**

5. **Mental Health Support:** Offer enhanced information and support for students' mental health.
6. **Improved Wi-Fi:** Enhance on-campus Wi-Fi connectivity for better student access.
7. **Networking Opportunities:** Facilitate networking both inside and outside the classroom, supporting students in using networking tools.
8. **Language and Writing Support:** Provide support with English language, writing assignments, and referencing for students who require it.

**Teaching Recommendations**

9. **Ice-breakers and Team-building:** Incorporate ice-breakers and team-building activities into classes.
10. **Brainstorming Tasks:** Integrate brainstorming tasks to stimulate creative thinking.
11. **Dialogue and Discussion:** Encourage active dialogue and discussion within classes.
12. **Interactive Tools:** Use tools like Mentimeter, Padlet, and Kahoot to engage students.
13. **Assignment Requirements:** Ensure assignment requirements are well-defined for students.
14. **Timely Student Support:** Address student queries promptly.
15. **Feedback Timing:** Provide timely feedback on assignments.
16. **Resource Utilization:** Encourage students to explore various learning resources, such as reading lists.

## 5. Any lessons learned from working in partnership?

All those engaged in this project, including both academics and students, acquired valuable teamwork experience. Through our discussions, students and tutors exchanged and developed ideas, leading to insightful findings about engagement in the two modules. Consequently, we gained a better understanding of student engagement in our modules which enables us to identify ways to boost engagement levels in future modules.

From the perspective of the lecturer, collaborating closely with our students was a gratifying experience, as we valued the meaningful contributions our student partners made to the project.

This collaborative effort allowed us to approach our efforts to support student engagement from diverse angles, enhancing our understanding of our roles as lecturers at the foundation level. Ultimately, this experience provided us with invaluable tools to support our future students in their learning journey. Additionally, our student partners played a significant role in the project, actively distributing questionnaires and leading focus group discussions. This involvement from students created a relaxed and familiar atmosphere, encouraging research participants to share their honest reviews openly. While working in this way, we all developed a strong sense of community and trust we believe is an important foundation of learning for both academic staff and students. As a result, we are inspired to engage more closely with our students in future research.

From the perspective of a student, this collaboration was a humbling experience, as our contributions to the research were valued, supported, and taken back to the student body via our focus groups where we engaged in meaningful conversations and gained honest, and relevant reviews for staff and students alike. This was very inspiring for the student co-creators, to take part in academic review for the sake of research for the IAP/CT modules in the foundation year. It became an honour to participate in the weekly meetings with the lecturers with a single goal in mind creating a more engaging and happy learning environment for all concerned. Furthermore, our participation in the program has helped us improve our research skills, communication, problem-solving, and team building while building confidence. As a result of this experience, it would be an honour to participate in further research with our lecturer co-creators in the future.

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