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Teaching and learning under emergency remote, online conditions: 'Let's Connect' with our students

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The challenge

In the swift move from in-person lectures to online learning, most universities hurriedly composed resources which helped lecturers move content online and supported students with access to the online environment (Le Grange, 2020). However, little attention went towards online measures to help lecturers gain insight into the students' comprehension of content. Having insight into the students' foundational knowledge, on which lecturers build is considered part of good pedagogic practice (Biggs and Tang, 2007). Moreover, less attention was focused on the affective domain and the creation of a social space for lecturers and students to connect in; this has particular relevance for large, first-year classes who are new to this academic environment. Thus, while the technical aspects of enabling students to access the online content received consideration, areas associated with the affective and cognitive domains needed responsiveness.

As a lecturer, I wanted my first years to know that I was available for them even if our physical interaction was limited. My concern with the move to the online platform was that I was not able to easily identify concepts my students found challenging. During the in-person lectures, the mannerisms of the students and questions that they posed gave an indication of their understanding, and this helped to shape instruction. This communication was limited in the online environment, where pre-recorded lectures became the norm and discussion forums were a place only a few students ventured. One focus of this article is to provide a way in which lecturers can establish contact with students in large online classes, and the other focus is to propose a way for lecturers to identify the cognitively challenging concepts that students experience on the course.

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Noddings' (2005) seminal work forms the basis of the 'Pedagogy of care'. This framework highlights the centrality of the affective domain which influences pedagogic praxis as it explains the importance of our response as lecturers to our students. The lecturers' responsiveness within the online environment could provide students with a sense of support at a time when there is limited in-person contact (Rose and Adams, 2014). There is, however, a dearth of literature on whether this notion is justified for the large, first-year classes.

The response

In 2021 I moved my teaching from in-person lectures to the online environment. To establish a connection with my class of 522 Biology first-years, and to identify conceptual challenges that they experienced with the content, I constructed a document entitled 'Let's Connect'. This document, provided in the first week, consisted of six questions, and for the five weeks that followed, I provided different sets of a maximum of three questions (examples below). The document was provided online every Monday, and the deadline for submission was the following Monday, the students' response was voluntary.

To get to know my students I gave the following statements to them in week 1:

- Tell me about yourself
- My personal and/or academic goal this year is to…
- I think a typical day this year will involve …
- My fears for this course/year are …
- My expectations of myself in this course are …
- I hope my lecturer …

Over the weeks that followed this document focused on uncovering the content that students had difficulty understanding. The following stems were posed:

- I didn't understand this material that was covered this week …

- Summarise the most important concepts of the week as concisely as you can. Write this out as if you were explaining it to someone with little biological background…
- This is what my lecturer thought I knew but I actually don't have this knowledge for the work that was covered this week …

The question which probed the students' expectations of assessments was:

- If you were the lecturer, what questions would you ask to find out whether the students understood the most important material for this week?

The main affirmation for the value of the 'Let's Connect' document came from the class representatives, who reported that the responses the class received helped them better understand the layout of topics and how they should work with the material that was provided online. 90.8% (n=474) of the class responded in the first week; this decreased to 40.1% (n=213) by the final week. An advantage of this initiative is that usually during an in-person 45-minute lecture, I would receive about five questions from the class, but with the Let's Connect document, I received questions from an average of 57.9% (n=302) of the class per week. Students were using this opportunity to deepen their understanding. Considering that first years come from a variety of school backgrounds, I achieved an understanding of what their foundational knowledge was for gateway concepts for the course and used this to personalise my lecture presentations.

Recommendations

First years need to feel part of the learning environment for quality engagement to occur. Lecturers need to find ways to create a space for this connection between the students and lecturer within the online learning environment. The Let's Connect document provided a space for meaningful conversation. This type of initiative could assist the lecturer to create a more enriched learning environment based on the needs of the students. The drawback was the intensive time and effort it took to establish this line of communication with the students. To circumvent this problem, I divided the class list into two, and, on a rotational basis, responded to each half on alternate weeks. Based on the content of the

responses, I provided the class with feedback on common areas of concern. Going forward, I will allocate students to small groups of about five students each. Once students have completed the Let's Connect document individually, they could discuss their responses within their group, and a group representative could then list the key responses and concerns. This collated response could then be sent to me. During class I will provide general feedback based on their response as a cohort and show how these are addressed in the lecture structure. Thereby students should still feel heard and be aware of the connection that exists between them and the lecturer.

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