Building Virtual Communities of Learning via Online Group Personal Tutoring Sessions

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In preparation for the 2020-21 academic year, the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences at Aston University prepared a portfolio of virtual group personal tutoring sessions aimed at bringing students together in online communities, as the usual methods through which students form learning communities would be disrupted due to Covid-19. The sessions were also designed to prepare students for the academic year ahead, focusing on a different academic theme each session. Resources were provided for personal tutors to inform their own delivery of the sessions. There is obvious benefit in providing support for students who are new to university and the Engineering and Applied Science Foundation Year Programme (EAS FYP) has always placed a high priority on personal tutoring. Within EAS FYP, personal tutoring is scaffolded; as the year progresses the proactive delivery of support is decreased, encouraging student independence and increasing confidence. The EAS FYP use of the virtual personal tutoring sessions developed by the College was similar in approach but with a few alterations to tailor the provision to foundation year students. This paper discusses the use of virtual group personal tutoring sessions to build communities of learning and the plans for their use in 2021-22.

Virtual Communities of Learning in Education

Community is central to the human experience and is undoubtedly beneficial to the student experience and education. Developed from 'community of learners' (Brown & Campione, 1990) and 'community of practice' theory (Wenger, 1998), the concept of community within an educational setting is now difficult to define across the sector and can refer to a variety of experiences or approaches encountered and used in HE. The need for building community within a university setting is clear, however, as Bickford and Wright (Bickford and Wright, 2006) state, 'were community not important for learning, colleges and universities would have little reason to exist—people could learn efficiently by reading and interacting with tutors'. Ligorio *et al.* have explored the role of the tutor in achieving the building of a community of learners in the context of designing tasks and helping members of the group to 'turn their implicit knowledge into explicit' (Ligorio *et al*., 2002, p. 139). Social integration is an important aspect of the transition to university (Hausmann *et al*., 2009; Tinto, 1997, 2003).

The global Coronavirus pandemic brought lockdown regulations to the UK which forced a move to online Learning and Teaching at the end of the 2019-20 academic year and for much of 2020-21. This had a huge impact on the manner of support which could be provided to students. Educational communities were still required (and perhaps the need to build them was increased by the pandemic and the lockdowns), however where these communities would occur naturally within social spaces and classrooms, it was envisaged that these would be harder to replicate in online classrooms during the teaching of academic modules.

Personal tutors can foster this social integration and so personal tutoring was identified as a focus for a mix of academic and social group work. The delivery of personal tutor group activities has been explored with positive outcomes (Brooman and Darwent, 2014). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper a community of learning is assumed to encompass social groups created where members have a common task and the focus of this paper is on how personal tutoring can be used to achieve this as Learning and Teaching delivery moved to virtual environments within HE.

Background to Engineering and Applied Science Foundation Year Programme (EAS FYP)

As this paper discusses the Engineering and Applied Science Foundation Year Programme (EAS FYP), a little contextual background is required. The EPS FYP has a diverse cohort with an intake of around two hundred students per year. This diversity provides an educational challenge but adds to the spirit of community and as a result benefits the cohort's education. The students are streamed into pathways which allow progression onto their chosen degrees. These pathways provide access to a range of degree programmes in the area of the student's interest. For example, a student on a Mechanical Engineering pathway has progression options onto a range of related degrees. Each pathway has a module diet specifically for those students who want to progress to the chosen degrees. The pathways are also used to collect students together into personal tutor groups. Thus, communities are being built across many levels, i.e., EAS FYP Programme level, progression level, module level and personal tutor group level. However, these methods of creating community in the cohort during the 2020-21 academic year would prove more difficult in a (mainly) virtual world.

The approach design

As indicated above, personal tutoring is one method of support for students which also allows them to build community. With the knowledge that face-to-face personal tutoring would be problematic in 2020-21, due to the lockdown regulations, the Aston College of Engineering and Physical Sciences formed a Personal Tutor working group. One outcome of the group was to design a range of online personal tutoring sessions over the Summer of 2020. The plan was to deliver these online personal tutoring sessions to the first year and foundation year students.

Weekly, online, timetabled, themed sessions were planned for the first six weeks of the autumn term. This was preceded by an ice-breaking online session during welcome week. The themed sessions ranged in topic from time management to revision. These were delivered to a group of students by one personal tutor. After week six the students were offered voluntary, drop-in, online group personal tutoring sessions. These sessions were timetabled for the rest of the first term. The second term saw the continuation of the weekly, group, timetabled drop-in sessions. During both terms students were also invited to online, one-to-one personal tutoring sessions.

The College of Engineering and Physical Sciences committee also provided a package of resources which could be used as a framework by the personal tutor to deliver the session. The EPS FYP teaching team took these packages and modified them for use with the foundation year students. Each EPS FYP personal tutor used these modified packages to deliver the six sessions in their own style. The EPS FYP approach to these sessions was to use the packages as talking points and generate discussion between the students. This way each student received a slightly different but broadly similar session. The emphasis was placed on student engagement and interaction with the central thesis being one of community building.

The delivery design

The College of Engineering and Physical Science utilised the Blackboard Collaborate platform, embedded within the Aston University linked VLE software, to host the group virtual Personal Tutoring sessions. However, within the EAS FYP the decision was taken to facilitate the sessions utilising Microsoft Teams as an expansion of a pre-existing pilot study to investigate its usage as an aid for effective collaborative working. The pilot study was created for a module as a means of improving the effectiveness of group work, and it was utilised for project work within the module, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic restrictions. It was found that, alongside the effective production of the project end-product, it actually enhanced the sense of community within the module cohort. As such, we wanted to explore its usage within personal tutoring across the EAS FYP as a means of creating a sense of community.

In order to create the environments for the virtual learning communities, each Personal Tutor was provided with their own Team area in Microsoft Teams, allowing them to host the timetabled group sessions and enabling another avenue for peer-peer and tutor-tutee communications external to the sessions. Within the Team area, two types of Channel were created; one 'General' open group area, available to all tutees, and for each tutee, an individual 'Private' channel to allow for the opportunity to undertake one-to-one communication. Within the General channel, the virtual group sessions were hosted and general full cohort communications, announcements and reminders could take place. This area was intended to provide a chat space for all members of the personal tutoring group, creating a sense of community. The purpose of the Private channels, was as an attempt to replicate face-to face, one-to-one sessions via video calls during the pandemic. Students were still able to initiate and host one-to-one communications with their personal tutor via email if they wished, however, Teams provided another avenue for private tutor-tutee communication.

Feedback and Findings

To evaluate the outcomes of the delivery of the group sessions, student and staff feedback was sought immediately after the series of group sessions had been completed (in teaching week 6). This was done via an online questionnaire to collect feedback from students and via open-text questions sent to staff via email. The aim of the data collection was to evaluate the overall approach, but this paper focuses on the outcomes in relation to building communities of learning only.

The student experience

Of the 72 students who responded to the online questionnaire invitation sent to all participating students (Foundation and Year 1 students), 13 responses were gained from Foundation Programme students. From their responses regarding their experiences, a summary of which is shown in Figure 1, it can be seen that students were satisfied with their overall experience and with the use of MS Teams as the software used to deliver the session. In addition, the students who responded were satisfied with their own contribution and the working atmosphere amongst their peers during the sessions.

From these responses, however, it appears that students felt that the delivery methods used did not always help them get to know other students or allow them to actively contribute to the success of the sessions. As these are two key areas to help build communities of learning, this suggests that there are areas for improvements. However, the students still rated these areas highly (above 3 out of 5) which indicates that a certain level of success was reached.
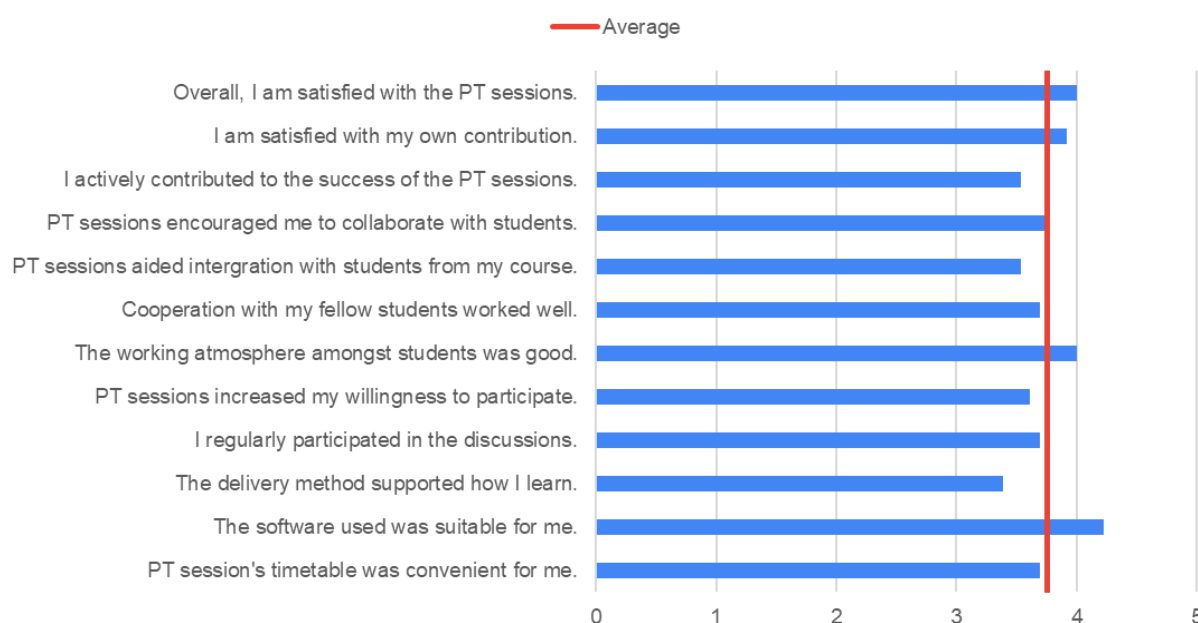

Figure 1: Aston Foundation Centre student experiences of attending group personal tutor sessions (Ordidge, 2021)

To explore these responses in more depth, open-text questions were also asked and the responses indicated that students found some sessions too structured and staff-led, leading to students not being able to actively contribute and interact with their peers.

The staff experience

Staff were asked to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of their experience of the group sessions, as well as any potential improvements to the approach or individual sessions that they felt could be made in future delivery. Responses were gained from six of the seven Foundation Programme personal tutors.

A word cloud created from the staff views is shown in Figure 2; these views aligned with the student experiences in terms of highlighting that some sessions involved text-heavy resources which stifled engagement (through bombarding the students with information and being formal in structure). This was despite the EAS FYP personal tutors using the prepared packages as conversational starters in the manner described previously. Staff felt that the sessions were beneficial for developing their relationship with their tutees and that the time-tabling of the sessions on a Friday enabled the students to reflect as a group at the end of each week.

Figure 2:   Word cloud generated from Foundation Programme staff responses to open-text evaluation questions

It was noted that the delivery of the sessions was an important factor in maintaining engagement, with a relaxed approach being key to maintaining student interest in the series of sessions. This echoes the feedback from staff and students that formal, information heavy sessions were detrimental to their experience. Noted in Figure 2 is the word 'co-creation', as staff felt that students needed to be involved in the creation of the sessions in order to ensure that the sessions continued to engage students meaningfully.

Moving Forward with Virtual Learning Communities

Overall, the approach was deemed to be beneficial for developing personal tutor relationships between staff and tutees and it is seen that students felt that they were able to engage with their peers in a good working atmosphere during the sessions. The indications that tutor-tutee relationships were developed, group reflections did take place and students felt happy with their level of contribution across the series of group meetings suggest that the sessions did aid in the development of a virtual community of learning for the personal tutor groups. This said, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from the data collected and further research with a focus on communities of learning is planned for future delivery to explore this finding.

Whilst the pandemic-linked restrictions are being lifted, there will always be a place for virtual communities of learning, as they offer a flexible opportunity to interact with peers and staff on a social level, alongside gaining valuable information. As a College, we intend to continue

utilising the synchronous online group Personal Tutoring sessions in the 2021-22 academic year, with the adjustment that the sessions will be spread across the two main Teaching Periods as opposed to being consolidated into just the first teaching period. This will offer our students regular timetabled opportunities for continued interaction with their peers and personal tutor across the academic year.

As seen with this academic year, we as a department will also continue to tailor the session content to the needs of our Foundation Year student. This will allow for the avoidance of content replication when the students enter the sessions in their first year of undergraduate studies. Additionally, this enables our department to create student-led sessions, to optimise the value and benefits taken from the sessions, and to allow us as academics to match our individual styles to this delivery. An aspect of change that we intend to integrate into our Foundation Year Programme experience is the embedding of a more hybrid approach to the overall personal tutoring experience. Whilst providing a virtual community is clearly very beneficial, there will still always be a need for the provision of more face-to-face personal interaction opportunities, particularly when dealing with sensitive student issues on a one-to-one basis. We will continue to allow these interactions to be predominantly student-initiated, continuing to communicate with our personal tutees about these opportunities.

As to whether MS Teams shall continue to be used, or whether a return to the implementation of Blackboard Collaborate in-line with other departments in the College, various discussions are taking place. Given the pros and cons around both software platforms for this purpose, and based on the experiences derived from the EPS FYP pilot study of the usage of Teams, we would advocate keeping this option open.

Moreover, we intend as a wider Foundation Year department, to create a Personal Tutoring Forum accessible to all academics with personal tutoring responsibilities across the various Foundation Year Programmes, the purpose of which is to provide staff with an avenue to gain support from colleagues and to share good practice in order to enhance the personal tutoring experience that all of the Foundation Year students encounter. Ultimately, it would be good to see this forum expand to incorporate College-wide personal tutoring academics.

Acknowledgments

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