Promoting Student Interaction in a Flexible Delivery Environment

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ABSTRACT

Flexible delivery can restrict student interaction for learning and socialisation. In UCOL's previous IS programmes it has been observed that the students rarely interact during flexible classes. At the end of the course the students may not know their peers. For those students attending the Introductory Certificate in Business Computing (ICBC), it is, often, their first step in tertiary education. As such, it is important for both effective learning and student satisfaction that they interact with each other, assist each other and have a sense of belonging. The underlying philosophy of ICBC continues from that of ICC to be a confidence building course. Therefore, during the first weeks of the course, it is planned to involve students in activities that will help them get to know each other and to create an open and friendly atmosphere. This action research attempts to determine the best methods of developing interaction amongst students in a flexible delivery environment.

KEY WORDS

Student interaction, flexible delivery, ice breakers, action research

1. INTRODUCTION

The students on the Introductory Certificate in Business Computing (ICBC) course are taught in a flexible delivery environment. The course has four modules and students attend one two-hour specialist session per week, for each module. There are three repeat sessions per module and the students may attend any one of these. They can then attend as many flexible sessions as they wish where they can work independently, with a lecturer on hand to provide help if necessary.

One of the disadvantages of the flexible system, where the students attend as they please, is that there is not the same opportunity for the students to get to know each other as there is in a one-class situation. It is more difficult for students to develop the same sense of camaraderie and have opportunities for the students to communicate with each other. This lack of communication with others may lead to a sense of isolation by some students and be demotivating for learning. Since this system was implemented an observation has been that some students will come to the class, sit in front of their computers and leave at the end of the session without talking to anyone. Some students have commented that they have not been able to get to know anyone on the course or even know the other students' names.

The course is, for many of the students, their first step into tertiary education. As such, it is important for both effective learning and student satisfaction that they become a group of people who can communicate with each other, help each other and have a sense of belonging. Historically, one or two icebreakers were used on the first day, and then the students have been left to naturally form friendships and study partners. For some students

this was acceptable. For others however, this was not enough for them to get to know other students. It was decided to introduce icebreakers and small group activities to help increase the student interaction. As Jones (1991 p.11) suggests, "The metaphor of icebreaking is apt. An icebreaker is a vessel designed to clear a passage in frozen waters and open up channels of communication. In human terms icebreakers are intended to deal with frosty situations, cold starts, nervous freezing. They aim not only to break the ice, but to warm the atmosphere."

Teachers need to continually update, improve and learn in order to provide an effective programme of learning for their students. Stenhouse (1987) refers to 'teachers as researchers', where research and development lies with teachers themselves. They need to test, evaluate and adapt ideas in their own classroom in order to increase the understanding of their work and better their teaching. Action research is a method that teachers can use to do this. It was decided to use this approach when implementing the learning and socialising activities.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Ruddick (1985) makes an interesting analogy between teachers and artists. Not only do artists need to be disciplined in order to perfect their work, they also
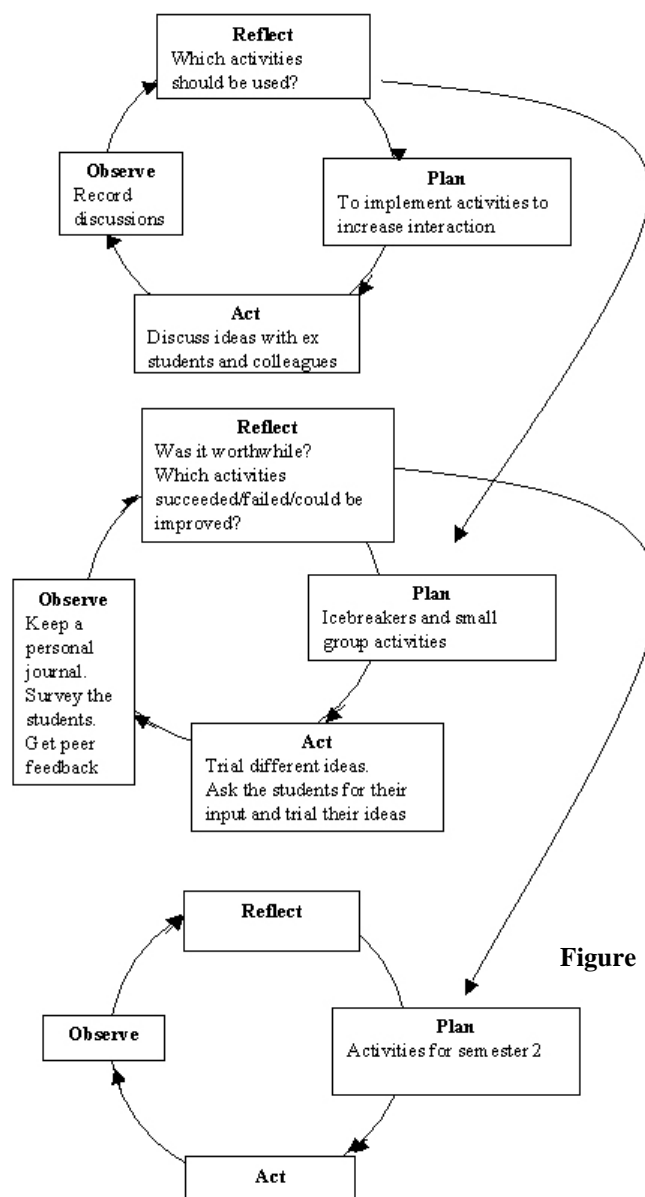

Figure 1: Action Research Cycle

need to be able to critically monitor and examine the work they produce to develop their skill. Teachers can learn and improve their practice in the same way. Ruddick (1985, p 125) suggests that using personal classroom research, in which teachers critically examine their own work, "…offers a way of structuring a familiar situation that allows the teacher to explore it in depth, to gain new insights, to set new goals, and to achieve new levels of competence and confidence."

An action research approach was used to try out different ideas in practice in order to improve the interaction between the students.

Action research is a method of collaborative, critical enquiry into a teacher's own teaching practice (Kremmis and McTaggert, 1988). This practical method of problem solving was where the teacher, as researcher, trialled ideas to seek solutions to improve an aspect of the learning environment. With the help of group decision making, the lecturer used this systematic method to critically examine, reflect upon and modify the ideas. It involved keeping a personal journal to record observations and ideas on a daily basis. This provided a focal point for reflection and later review, the results of which are incorporated into this research.

The process occurs as an on-going spiral of cycles of four main steps - plan, act, observe, reflect (Figure 1). The research can start at any step.

- Identify the problem and develop a plan to improve what is already happening
- Implement the plan
- Observe the effects
- Reflect on the effects as a basis for further planning

3.   BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Embarking on this research started with personal reflection and then interviewing a group of past students for their ideas on how they viewed student interaction in the flexible learning environment and whether they believed it would be worthwhile to introduce activities to promote it. The overall consensus of opinion was that there was definitely room for doing activities that would help improve interaction. They believed that it would not only help the students to make new friends, but that it would also help to create a relaxed and comfortable working environment. Two things that the students suggested needed to be taken into consideration were:

- some students may find these activities intimidating,

so they will need to be presented in a way that is as lighthearted and non-threatening as possible. As one student suggested, "Fun and laughter is the best way for people to come together."

- some students do not like interaction with others and are happier to be left to themselves. These students may have a negative attitude to the activities.

When choosing the activities this simple checklist created by Malouf (1994, p. 103) was used to evaluate the icebreakers:

- Will it THREATEN people or RELAX them?
- If you had to do it would you HATE it or ENJOY it?
- Will it lead to FAILURE or SUCCESS?
- Will it build BARRIERS or TRUST?

In collaboration with other lecturers this list was enhanced to include:

- Will the students will find this fun?
- Will it help the students to get to know other students' names?
- Will it be worthwhile in helping the students to get to know each other?
- Will it help to promote a friendly, comfortable atmosphere?

The icebreakers and small group activities were selected from some that had been used previously and ideas from the other lecturers, books and internet resources.

4.   PLANNING

4.1   Aims

To foster student interaction by providing activities that will help:

- the students to get to know each other in a light-hearted and non-threatening way.
- the students get to know each others names.
- the students to communicate with each other and help each other.
- to create a friendly, relaxed atmosphere within the group.

4.2   Action

The first two weeks were spent using icebreakers and small activities to get the students mingling and out of their seats. One ICBC lecturer, the author, facilitated the activities.

Week 1 - the same activities were used by the three groups to see how they compared.

Week 2 - different icebreaker activities for each of

the three groups were used.

Week 3 - the students were asked for their ideas and suggestions.

Week 4 - ways of implementing the students ideas were discussed.

Every session began with walking around the room greeting people and asking their name if they didn't already know it. As the students left for a break (and also at the end of the session) the students were encouraged to say "See you later (name)," to all the students in their group for that day.

Week 1   Icebreaker and small group activities

1. Autograph Game

A grid is created with thirty squares. In each square there is a statement such as 'Plays the piano' or 'Likes Chinese food'. The idea is to get as many different students as possible to write their names in the squares, until they are all filled. This means that they might have to go around the students more than once. As each square is filled in the person thanks them, using their name.

2 . My Name is and I like….

Form a line according to when their birthday falls. From there divide the students into groups and form circles. The first student says their name and something that they like beginning with the first letter of their name. The next person must repeat the previous name and what they like, and then add their own. This repeats around the circle until the last person who has to repeat all the names. The circle can then be reversed.

3. Give the students an opportunity to find out about the lecturer by getting them to ask questions about things that they would like to know about the lecturer .

4. As an activity to get them out of their seats, interacting and having some fun, the students, using the skills learnt from their first session on computer graphics, create a picture of a frazzled computer user. They start drawing for a short time and then move to the next computer to continue the picture. This is repeated three more times. They then return to their own computer to see what has been created!

Week 2   Icebreaker and small group activities
Day one
1. Famous couples e.g. Romeo and Juliet. Students have a name pinned to their back and they find their partner by going around asking yes/no questions only.

2. 2. Q-tips. Everyone in the group is given four Q-tips. As they say something about themselves they put a Q-tip into a hole in their head i.e. nose, ear, mouth and leave them there until everyone has finished.

3. Small groups are formed by the students themselves to discuss revision questions.

4. Scavenger Hunt. The students write down one fact about themselves that the other students would not know about them. These are used to form a grid like the autograph game. The students have a week to get as many names as they can.

Day two
1. Aeroplane name game. Everyone is given a piece of paper on which they write their name. The paper is then folded to make a dart and flown up to the front of the room. The students choose a dart, find the person that made it, and spend some time finding out what they can about that person

2. Repeat activity 3 and 4 from Day 1.

Day Three
1. Each person is given a piece of paper with a sign on it e.g. triangle, square, wavy lines etc. They need to find their partner who has the same shape and to do this without talking. Then join into groups.

2. "Take as many as you think you'll need". Each group is given a container of skittles and each person is told to "Take as many as you think you'll need." Once everyone has some they are told that they must tell the rest of the group one thing about themselves for every skittle that they have.

3. Repeat activity 3 and 4 from Day 1.

Week 3   Group discussion
1. A koosh ball is thrown around the room, calling out the student's name who is to catch the ball. The student thanks the thrower by name and then throws it to another student. A second ball is introduced after a couple of minutes.

2. Group discussion (to be followed by feedback and class discussion) on students' ideas and suggestions for activities that could be done to improve student interaction.

3. Students walk around the room viewing the landscape scenes created by all the other students.

Week 4   Feedback and suggestions
1. Discuss feedback and suggestions from previous week.
2. Create modified clipart by changing computers in the same manner as the frazzled computer users activity from week 1.

5. OBSERVATIONS AND FEEDBACK

5.1 Icebreakers

All the icebreakers went really well, with the exception maybe of Q-tips which some students found just a bit too 'silly'-although it did create a few laughs

Table 1: How useful (very + fairly) do you think that the activities to increase student interaction have been in helping you to:

Get to know other students' names	95%
Get to meet other students	100%
Make friends on the course	88%
Find people to discuss your work with	88%
Overall how helpful do you think it has been in creating a friendly relaxed atmosphere within the group	97%

and one student on the feedback survey said this was the most enjoyable activity. The Scavenger hunt was not completed by as many students as hoped. Some of the activities were changed or adapted after being trialled e.g. the activity "My name is and I like…" After reversing the circle, the order of the group was changed and then just names were used.

The author participated in all the activities as it was important to demonstrate to the students that the lecturer was interested and could laugh and have fun as well. It was also an excellent way for the lecturer to get to know all the students names quickly and to know the students better on a personal level. An interesting event occurred in the second week when a new student arrived in class.

When he was introduced to the class just about everyone called out 'good morning' to him (using his name, of course). The same group, as they greeted each other, started shaking hands, which started to become the norm. By week four, there were spontaneous greetings as the lecturer walked into the room. It had become a group norm!

5.2 Group Discussions

Group feedback from weeks three and four was informative. Most of the groups came up with similar ideas- study groups, email groups, opportunities to talk and do activities together in class, group projects, social and sporting activities. Ideas were discussed as to how the students might form study groups and email groups. One group of students formed a study group almost immediately and had their first meeting within a week.

One person volunteered to be the contact person for email messages. She formed a mailing list of the class members so that if anyone wanted to do a class activity they could create an email and send it to her. She would then send it out to everyone in the class, which worked well. Within a week a social evening at a local bar, Insomnia, was organised and ICBC t-shirts were made for the event. The evening proved to be very successful. To date other activities that have been arranged include; the formation of two indoor netball teams, teams to participate in the "Mello Jello' day, and a computer games evening. There is also a group of students who have formed together to play rugby in the courtyard during breaks.

5.3 Student Survey

A questionnaire was distributed in week five for formalised feedback. They were asked to rate the successfulness of the activities ranging from very helpful to not at all helpful. Of the students attending the course seventy-five percent responded to the survey.

The results of this questionnaire showed an overwhelming positive response. Interestingly, the one student who replied with 'not at all helpful' to every question except 'get to meet other students' stated on his questionnaire sheet that he was, "Sorry if I sound bitter, but I don't like working in groups."

When the students were asked which activities they liked the best the most popular replies were the autograph game, My name is and I like…, greetings, koosh ball, group discussion, Insomnia evening and the computer games evening. When asked which they liked the least, the general consensus was that they were all beneficial.

The only activity that more than one person did not like was Q-tips.

5.4   Peer Review

In week four of the activities peer reviews of staff members were held. One of the lecturers who had completed the review last semester was asked to do it again with the aim of getting her feedback as to how she felt these activities may have improved student interaction and the atmosphere within the class. Her comments were, "Its worked. There is an excellent rapport with the students. The classroom atmosphere has definitely improved. There is a very relaxed, good feeling and the students are keen and involved." In discussion with the other lecturers on the course the general consensus of opinion was that the students do indeed appear more friendly and interactive than they have in previous semesters.

6.   CONCLUSIONS

The activities to increase student interaction have proved to be highly successful. The activities are simple and not very time-consuming and yet they have provided the students with a way to get to know each other and produced a learning environment that is friendly, comfortable, and relaxed. The students appear to be keen and motivated. As Malouf (1994) suggests, when you get to know others you stop feeling isolated and instead, "…you become a *group* of people who communicate with each other and help each other. And that's the essential basis for effective learning."

It has also proved to be an excellent way for the lecturer to get to know the students better and learn all their names. Using an action research approach has proved to be an excellent method for trialling the different ideas and effecting change. It has provided a systematic basis for planning, implementation and reflection. It has been most beneficial working in collaboration with others who have provided support, ideas and feedback. Using a journal to keep a daily record was also found to be very helpful.

7.   REFLECTION AND FUTURE ACTION

As this was just introduced at the beginning of the semester this year evaluation is still continuing. However, because of the obvious success of the activities they will be repeated in the future. It has been noted that developing social interaction does not need to be confined to icebreakers and game–type activities. The students themselves came up with ideas such as study groups, email groups and social activities in and out of the class.

These are all good ideas that will help to improve student interaction and help to develop their sense of camaraderie. It was suggested that providing a place for the students to meet during breaks and providing them with tea and coffee would be really helpful.

Although this would be an excellent idea, unfortunately it would be very difficult to arrange on the UCOL campus. In discussion with the other lecturers on this course the action research cycles will continue next semester starting with the planning and implementation of the following ideas:

1. Activities will be chosen from those that have proved to be the most popular with a view to further refining them.
2. Some new activities will be trialled.
3. A group project will be introduced early in the course programme to further interaction and promote study groups.
4. Some group email activities will be implemented at the beginning of the course that will help students to form email groups.
5. The students will be approached as to forming a social committee to help organise social activities for the students.
6. Further research in comparing assessment outcomes against next ICBC programmes will be carried out to see if there is a correlation with learning outcomes.

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