

It's Alive!

Context

As part of a teaching and learning unit, we are (at least partially) charged with offering support, resources and training for our faculty. Since the majority of our courses are completely asynchronous, our instructors (who for the purpose of this module are our learners) struggle with ways to interact and engage with their students in an online environment and tend to default to the use of discussion forums. While our instructors are required to have basic skills using our LMS and Zoom, they are not always comfortable with discussion forum interactions and their students commonly provide feedback regarding how detached and uninvolved our instructions are. Therefore, we are always looking for other technology-enabled solutions in order to better meet our learners' needs, and in turn, their students' needs: the challenge is finding the balance between what our instructors need (and the support we can provide them) and what the students will benefit most from.

Process for Empathizing

It is much easier to empathize with the students taking our courses since they have different options to provide feedback so we are very aware of their needs and can empathize with their perspectives. Something I had not fully considered until this point was how our learners (the instructors) must feel - they are expected to come up with innovative ways to interact with students and learn the new practices or technologies simultaneously. This step was enlightening for me since it made me stop and reflect on the other learner population we are there to support.

Defined Learner Challenge

Upon reflection, there were actually two learner challenges to consider: how to create more engaging opportunities for communication and discussion in an online course while also supporting our learners in how to use whatever new technology-enabled solutions we try to implement.

Ideating and Prototyping

Finding a solution that would increase student motivation in our courses using technology that instructors would feel comfortable using was more difficult than anticipated. Through the SECTIONS analysis, it became clear that our choices were more limited, taking into account financial and institutional barriers. Accordingly, it was much more sustainable to choose a technology-enabled solution that would be endorsed and supported by our internal IT services, so looking into the different possibilities with Zoom was the most logical choice.

Currently, our discussion forum activities are all written responses and the interaction is limited to those who actually participate in a timely manner. Knowing Zoom has many other functions that we don't commonly use motivated me to explore other ideas and options. So, the goal was to leverage an existing tool and find new ways to utilize them that would not overwhelm our instructors but still boost student engagement. The plan is therefore to encourage the breakout room, recording and whiteboard features to facilitate synchronous small-group discussions in lieu of always imposing written responses that are more time sensitive. This way, students can speak with their classmates 'live', record the discussion and interactions, use the whiteboard to note any important points, with the added bonus that they choose when to meet and schedule meetings themselves, instead of having to follow a class schedule.

Planned Implementation

Since this is still in the planning phase, the intention is to implement this for the upcoming fall term, which would give us enough time to train our instructors and ensure they feel well supported to then start slowly implementing this new approach in our courses. That way by the following spring term, we will have at least two semesters of trials to assess if this is really the best option for our instructors, and by consequence, the students.