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Using social media to promote and facilitate deep learning in Mathematics and Statistics for a diverse group of learners

Day 2 – Parallel V (14.45-15.30)

Over several years and with varying levels of success Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) sessions have been provided at the University of Glasgow. Students were given the opportunity to work together informally with their classmates in the presence of a senior student facilitator. Although the demand for PAL was present, our attempts to bring students together voluntarily in the same place at the same time were disappointing. This was due to reasons such as (i) difficulties with timetabling and room bookings (ii) students' time constraints, for example, most students have part-time jobs, a large proportion commute, some have caring responsibilities, etc.

We instigated and semi-moderated Facebook groups for Level 1 & 2 Mathematics and Statistics students. These succeeded in providing accessible, non-threatening spaces for virtual academic dialogue (virtual PAL) between classmates, senior students and support staff. Since their inception there has been a steady stream of peer discussions ranging from social interactions to academic discussions.

In many senses, the conversations in the Facebook groups have been even more valuable than those arising from traditional PAL. Posts persist after online conversations, visible to all members. Students can self-select and choose which posts to interact with. Peer feedback can be requested at any time, without waiting for the next timetabled PAL session, vital for step-wise learning subjects such as Mathematics and Statistics. Activity continues through the day, evenings, weekends and holidays. Quieter, shyer students have intimated that virtual interaction is less intimidating than face-to-face participation. Non-native English speaking students have spoken of their appreciation of having time-buffers to digest and construct posts; junior students comment that they are able to familiarise themselves with mathematical terminology because of online discussions with, and between, senior students. Because of the nature of the online interaction, group members are developing the art of formulating academic questions and discussing mathematical problems.

At the end of the academic year, we roll over these original groups and rename them as second year groups. As before, senior students are invited to join these groups and participate in discussions, and many do so voluntarily.

In this talk, we discuss the structure of our Facebook groups and provide examples of conversations from the groups which illustrate instances of collaborative learning. We will also touch briefly on student feedback.