Case Study

Kindly provided by Dr. Mervyn Roy, Department of Physics and Astronomy

The engagement mark: a light touch way to encourage student engagement

Summary

To encourage student engagement and reduce the pressure of multiple credit-bearing micro-assessments we have introduced a new ‘engagement mark’ within Physics core modules.

Background and Rationale

In most degree courses there are set student activities which would ideally be purely formative. For example, students benefit greatly from completing weekly set problems, engaging in group problem solving workshops, attending feedback sessions etc. However, for multiple reasons, students do not always engage with these activities.

In many departments the conventional wisdom has been to make this type of activity credit bearing. This encourages student engagement, but multiple micro-assessments can lead to a number of other problems: students feel stressed and pressurised when ‘every mark counts’ and, with a large number of credit bearing assessments, there are associated problems with mark storage, security and rigour, and also with staff workloads.

In Physics we have pioneered the use of an ‘engagement mark’ as a way to encourage students to engage with the formative content in each core module while avoiding the problems surrounding multiple micro-assessments. Students are awarded the full engagement mark for ‘engaging to the best of their ability’ with the formative content of a module. Each student is awarded a credit of one or zero for each set formative activity, and the credits sum to 10% of the module mark for a student with full engagement.

One of our goals was to make this very light touch: every student starts with a full engagement mark and will retain this by default if they attend timetabled sessions, contribute to group work, and/or submit, on time, reasonable attempts at problems (the full engagement credit is awarded whether or not the answers are correct). Essentially the mark is used to encourage those students who show signs of disengaging with the course.
Current stage of the project and planned next steps

We introduced the engagement mark for group-workshops and problem solving classes in all first year core modules in 2014/15 and it will roll through to cover all 3 years of the BSc programme by 2016/17.

To date the signs are very positive: by considering the content in the final exams we have maintained strong marks distributions and averages consistent with previous years; there has been a significant reduction in student complaints and queries around marks and feedback now that problem solving classes and workshops are understood to be formative; and the student attendance and engagement is high.

We find this approach particularly helpful for students with specific learning needs, especially for students with autism. It forms a key part of our efforts toward the accessible curriculum.

For more information on the scheme in Physics, please contact Dr. Mervyn Roy at mr6@le.ac.uk. If you would like to discuss ways of adapting your assessment to encourage student engagement, get in touch with the Leicester Learning Institute by emailing lli@le.ac.uk.