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## Abstract

Peer-to-peer student interaction within an inclusive learning community is likely to help, not only students' learning, but also their well-being and mental health. To enhance such interaction, I present a pair of related innovations that are valued by students, easy to implement and widely applicable across different disciplines and teaching formats. The first innovation documents a form of teaching session activity where students are simply encouraged to talk with each other within class (in a safe, socially distanced manner), especially those that they do not already know. To free up the required time within teaching sessions, advances in online teaching tools are exploited to provide short on-demand videos for students to pre-watch before attending. The second innovation introduces a method of boosting peer interaction outside teaching sessions, through a novel 'peer match-up service'. This is especially relevant for students who do not know many others on their course or who are more introverted.

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## 1. Background

Peer-to-peer student interaction within an inclusive learning community can be very helpful in students' learning. In addition, peer-to-peer interaction is likely to help students' well-being and mental health, especially during these challenging times.

Yet despite its importance, lecturers have traditionally found it hard to promote peer-to-peer interaction. With limited time during teaching sessions, lecturers often feel the pressure to focus on teaching content instead. Outside teaching sessions, lecturers find it hard to know how to connect students.

Therefore, to enhance peer-to-peer student interaction, I present a pair of related innovations. As later evidenced, they are valued by students, easy to implement and widely applicable across different disciplines and teaching formats.

The first innovation documents a form of teaching session activity where students are simply encouraged to talk with each other within class (in a safe, socially distanced manner), especially those that they do not already know. To free up the required time within teaching sessions, advances in online teaching tools are exploited to provide short on-demand videos for students to pre-watch before attending. The second innovation introduces a method of boosting peer interaction outside teaching sessions, through a novel 'peer match-up service'. This is especially relevant for students who do not know many others on their course or who are more introverted.

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## 2. Methodology

### *First Innovation – Teaching Session Activity*

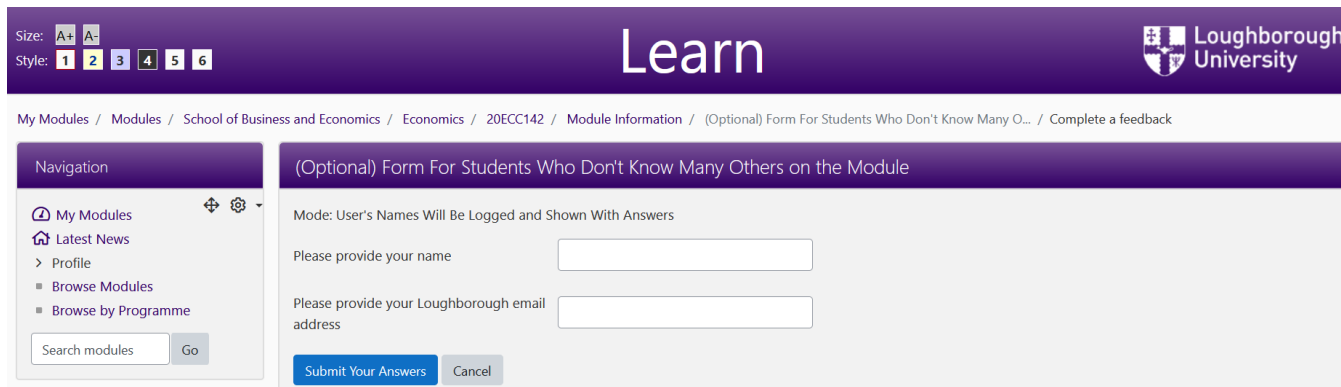
I trialled the teaching session activity on two very large undergraduate modules within Semester 1 2020/21. Due to the pandemic, the main lecture content was delivered entirely through on-demand video recordings (via Panopto), and then the students were offered repeated, socially distanced, in-person sessions. These sessions mostly involved interactive academic content to complement the videos. However, to promote more peer-to-peer interaction, I regularly devoted around ten minutes of each session to encourage the students to simply talk with each other in a safe, socially distanced manner. Students were especially encouraged to speak to those that they didn't already know.

To help start conversations, potential topics for discussion were provided in each session (e.g. which modules are you taking this semester, what are you finding hard on this module, or how are your placement/job plans going?). In Semester 2 2020/21, when all teaching was online, I conducted a variation of this approach in another large module by using breakout rooms in live lectures via MS Teams. Some example slides that were used to frame the discussions are provided in the supplementary materials alongside this case study.

### Second Innovation – Peer Match-Up Service

I conducted the peer match-up service on a large final year module Semester 2 2020/21. At the start of the module, I invited students who did not know many of their peers to sign up to the service. The service then aimed to introduce any signed-up students to a small group of their peers who had also signed up.

To enable the students to sign up, I used a basic ‘Feedback’ survey tool in Learn to allow students to submit their name and their Loughborough email address as shown below.

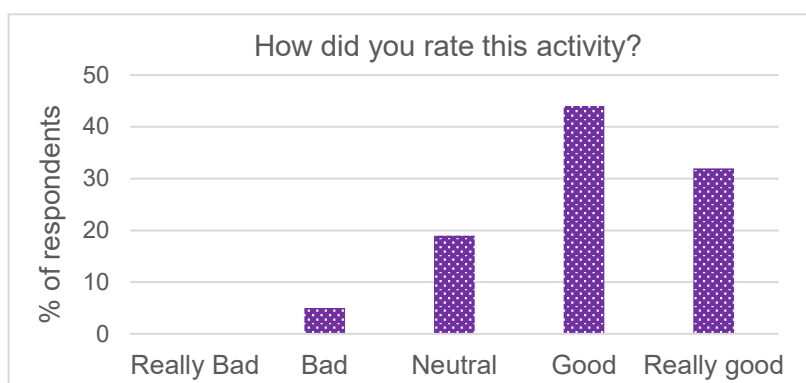


Within the first few weeks of term, I allocated any submissions into groups of 4-6 students. I then sent an email to each group to introduce the group members to each other and to encourage them to organise an initial (meet-up or) chat on Teams. In the supplementary materials alongside this case study, I provide additional details of how the sign-up survey tool was constructed in Learn and how the group email was written.

### 3. Student Benefits and Evidence of Success

#### First Innovation – Teaching Session Activity

To analyse the impact of the teaching session activity, I conducted a survey within the two modules via Learn. Over 100 students responded. As shown in the figure below, the activity was well received; 76% of students rated it as ‘Really Good’ or ‘Good’. One student wrote, *“I enjoyed the activity it made me comfortable around everyone in the class so I could speak if there was anything to say and it just got me more involved with everyone in class.”*



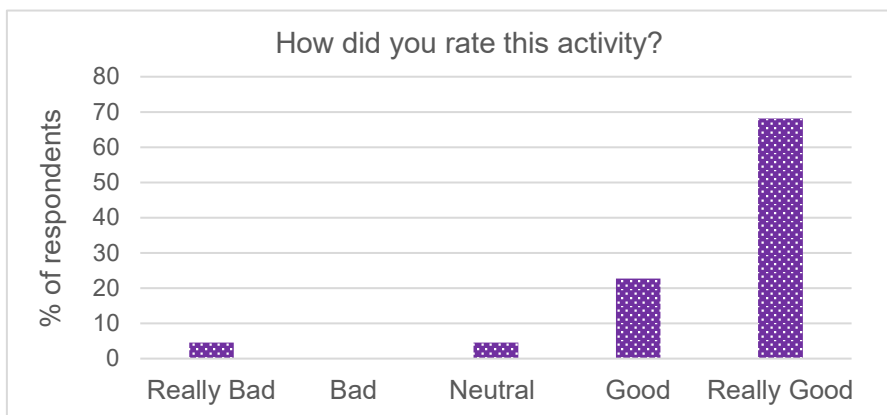
Further analysis indicates that the activity was significantly better received by i) students that had been away from the university the previous year (e.g. on placement or year abroad), and ii) final, rather than second, year students. There were no significant gender differences. Respondents suggested that the main benefits involved being able to meet students they had not before and hearing how others were adapting and managing (on the module and within the pandemic).

A later follow-up survey suggests that these reported benefits were long-lasting. Although some students reported lasting benefits in their direct academic learning, most reported lasting benefits in their well-being and relationships.

### Second Innovation – Peer Match-Up Service

Overall, the sign-up rate for the peer match-up service was 9% (29 out of 329). Of those students that signed up, 79% were male, and 38% had been away the previous year on a placement or year-abroad. This indicates that female students were less inclined to sign up, but that the service was not dominated by students who had been away the previous year.

To analyse the impact of the service, I conducted a small survey at the end of term. 22 of the 29 students that had signed up responded to the survey. Although this sample is small, the results can still give us an indication of how much the students valued the service. As shown in the figure below, the service was appreciated; 91% of the students rated it as ‘Really Good’ or ‘Good’.



Some student quotes included: *“Good service to allow students to meet other students on the course,”* and *“I felt that this really helped me to understand where I was at relative to others and have people to run my ideas by.”*

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## 4. Reflections and Issues

### First Innovation – Teaching Session Activity

It was rewarding to hear the room filled with happy chatter (albeit through masks); I even saw some students swapping contact details which was great. It was also really easy to implement. However, there were some issues to be aware of, as indicated by a small proportion of negative survey comments:

- Some students commented that they valued the suggested conversation topics.
- Some students showed a preference for the time to be spent on academic content instead. Hence, it is important to gauge students’ reactions and to not over-use the activity.
- Some students felt uncomfortable speaking to others. If a student seemed reluctant to participate, I gently suggested they could move to a different (socially-distanced) seat to be nearer to other students if they needed to. Otherwise, I didn’t push them to engage. Such students may be better catered for by the match-up service.

### Second Innovation – Peer Match-Up Service

Although the take-up rate was not large, the service was well worth doing for the following reasons:

- It was very easy to set up with extremely little work for me to do as the lecturer.
- As demonstrated above, it was really valuable to those students who did sign up, and it potentially reaches a different type of student, compared to the teaching session activity.

However, there were some issues to think about. First, it’s not clear how to best structure the groups. I avoided having a lone female or lone male within a group, but one could go further in engineering the groups by course or background. Second, there were a few negative comments in the survey that referred to it as ‘going badly’. To help, one could introduce further stages to re-assign students who didn’t get on with their initial group allocation.

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## 5. How Can Other Academics Reproduce This?

Student peer-to-peer interaction is really important for learning. Moreover, anything that lecturers can do to provide an inclusive learning community where students can make friends and interact is likely to offer benefits for students' well-being and mental health, especially in our current times.

In the first of two related innovations, I used a flipped classroom with pre-watch recordings to provide space for a teaching session activity where students are simply encouraged to talk with their peers, especially those that they don't already know. In the second innovation, I used a basic survey tool in Learn to provide a peer match-up service with the aim of helping the interaction of students who don't know many other students on a module.

Both innovations are easy to conduct and widely applicable across any subject or discipline, and the activity can work well in large lectures, smaller lectures or tutorials.