Workshop and discussion forum

Motivating and Engaging Students: From Ideas to Practice

Motivating and engaging students are core aspects of excellent teaching and learning. While this may be taken for granted, it is a complex process that demands continuous reflection and an openness to new approaches in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of teaching and learning activities.

In this workshop, three educators from the University of Akureyri, each with different professional backgrounds, will provide a short presentation drawing on their professional experiences and perspectives.

Their presentations will introduce topics for discussion, which participants will be invited to explore through a Fishbowl panel discussion format. This dynamic and engaging approach encourages active participation and collective learning, allowing participants to share experiences, challenge assumptions, and exchange ideas on motivating and engaging students in higher education.

Presenter: Audrey Louise Matthews, PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Akureyri

Traditionally, obscure or complex scientific concepts have be explained in the classroom using analogous examples, practical demonstrations and other visualisation methods, such as the use of three-dimensional models. For example, running on the spot can shed light on rates and proportions; soap, oil and water can demonstrate hydrophobic and hydrophilic interactions; and the use of party balloons, representing molecular orbitals, can show how molecules can react with each other.

Delivery with such explanatory tools is more challenging with online and blended delivery: The online teaching can become ´dry´ and reduce the engagement of students, with the risk of them not grasping the concepts being delivered.

In the past academic institutions, such as the Open University in the UK, have attempted to overcome this by providing learners with a practical kit of items for students to use during and after online classes. However, with today's availability of online and computer-based material, such as animated cell membrane activity and 3D modelling, are there new ways to actively 'demonstrate' obscure concepts and enhance online engagement?

Presenter: Sean Michael Scully, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, University of Akureyri

Student engagement is an ever-present challenge that becomes more difficult in asynchronous distance learning environments. The tasks of active student engagement with the material becomes more challenging in subjects, such as chemistry and biology, where complex topics often require critical analysis and discussion, as opposed to passively treating lecture slides like bulleted pointed CliffsNotes®.

Several strategies will be explored including the use of various “hook” approaches to boost attentiveness and cleverly combining at relevant as well as adding authentic hands-on activities to buttress specific concepts in the biological and physical sciences. Other approaches, such as providing students empty scaffolds and relying upon them to complete cursory tasks during the lecture before being able to proceed is another avenue that will be explored.

Of particular interest are the specific challenges associated with teaching complex topics such as enzyme kinetics in a way that is both quantitative and visual without relying on complex equipment or placing undue burden on the learners. Similarly, techniques such as protein purification are conceptually difficult for students to grasp. Providing tactile demonstrations in an asynchronous environment has shown in preliminary trials to boost student understanding through hands-on and inexpensive demonstrations that can be done without costly equipment or professional supervision.

Presenter: Jette Jörgensen Mebrouk, PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Akureyri

Traditionally, student involvement in higher education has been concentrated in the evaluation phase of teaching and learning activities, where students are invited to provide feedback on courses and educational experiences. Less attention has been given to the possibility of involving students in the planning phase, despite increasing emphasis on student-centred learning and partnership approaches in higher education.

If active participation in learning is believed to enhance students' motivation and engagement, could similar benefits arise when students are involved in planning learning activities and course content? What opportunities and challenges emerge when educators invite students to contribute to decisions that have traditionally been the responsibility of academic staff?

Drawing on experiences from a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) under Erasmus+, this presentation will explore an approach in which international students were invited to participate in the planning of a course. The presentation will raise questions about the role of students as partners in educational design and consider how their involvement in the planning process may influence motivation, engagement, and ownership of learning.