



What Happened to My 'A' Group? Reflections on Waning Student Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

NATASHA MWILA 

PRACTICE-BASED PAPER



ABSTRACT

This reflection shares experiences of evolving student engagement before covid-19 and during the covid-19 pandemic.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Natasha Mwila

De Montfort University, GB

Natasha.mwila@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

Student Engagement;
COVID-19; Reflection; Teaching
design; Learning Design

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mwila, N. 2021. What
Happened to My 'A' Group?
Reflections on Waning Student
Engagement During the
COVID-19 Pandemic. *Gateway
Papers*, 2(1): 9, pp. 1–2. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.3943/gp.25>

I lead a module designed to have 2-hour lectures and 1-hour workshops weekly. The pandemic and associated lockdowns forced a change in design. First was a blended design with lectures becoming pre-recorded videos and workshops conducted face-to-face. It evolved to remote learning, with workshops delivered online synchronously.

Pre-covid, my lectures had near-full attendance in the first 4 weeks, dipped after mid-term break and resurged after winter break. This pattern repeated in the second term with attendance peaking again just before examination. I was successful in engaging students that attended lectures with impromptu anecdotes, role plays, video clips, polls, and spot quizzes.

In workshops, I had a few notable students I will call the 'A' group. The 'A' group attended lectures and prepared in advance for workshops. They contributed to discussion, asking and answering questions.

In the early weeks of the shift in teaching design, I had some online sessions that made me feel like I was talking to myself. This made me question, "What happened to my 'A' group?" After a few surveys, I have learned that many of my students are part-time employed. Apparent free time and economic pressures have all contributed to some learners deciding to take additional hours of work and committing fewer to learning during the pandemic.

Lecture videos have inspired a binge-watching approach to learning. Many students are attending workshops without preparation; with a view to binge-watch all videos at a later, more convenient time. Not preparing for workshops results in either opting not to turn up or being silent during sessions.

I send weekly prompts on what students need to work on, but some students reported checking their emails irregularly. I have transferred some of my interactive tools online with mixed success. Some tools are difficult to employ without facial and vocalised responses. With most cameras being off, it is difficult to 'read the room'. I have relied on videos and polls as safer tools of engagement.

I expected that students wanted active engagement, if not with me, with each other. I would put them in breakout groups for short discussion for later feedback to the class. I would spotlight one member of each group to provide feedback. Most students preferred to discuss by text rather than by voice. Although this form of feedback is better than none, I found the less confident students felt more pressured to have 'correct' contributions by text than they did in free-flowing verbal discussion. Spotlighting students made it possible for me to hear from every student in the class at some point during the term, but it also had the effect of making the rest of the group passive during the session rather than contributing their ideas for the spotlighted student to collate. Not spotlighting students often meant I get no feedback.

I have come to terms with the fact that the workshops now need to resemble mini-lectures with a few activities to successfully engage students. Although I miss my 'A' group, the changes in design have allowed me to get to know the other members of the class much better. A new group is emerging with new competencies to interact online and articulate with clarity and conciseness, to direct their study and manage their time and confidence in this new learning design.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Natasha Mwila  orcid.org/0000-0003-3047-0129
De Montfort University, GB

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mwila, N. 2021. What Happened to My 'A' Group? Reflections on Waning Student Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Gateway Papers*, 2(1): 9, pp. 1–2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3943/gp.25>

Submitted: 23 February 2021

Accepted: 22 March 2021

Published: 17 August 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Gateway Papers is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by De Montfort University Press.