Small group activities in online/hybrid situations

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Small groups: what worked

• Three different environments:
  • Inf1B - compulsory first-year programming course, 400 students
  • Inf Connect - optional non-credit first-year course, usually around 30-150 students
  • Informatics Tutoring Network - around 30 student volunteers at all levels
Inf1B: recreating f2f environment online

Weekly tutorials - minimal change to last year

Outcome: hard to get students to engage
- cameras off, often mics off
- hard work to lead the group
- can work well with an engaged group
Inf1B: recreating f2f environment online

Weekly lab sessions - changed from drop-in to synchronous pair programming

Outcome: a bit more engaging

- peer programming mostly popular, though some students disliked it
- problems of non-engagement less, but still there
- challenging when there is a significant disparity in experience
Inf Connect: using Padlet for interaction

Weekly lectures, plus weekly breakout groups of 10-20 students. Padlet was used for brainstorming and sharing ideas.

Outcome: much better engagement
- was still lead by verbal discussions, so some problems remained
- much better way of sharing ideas
- still significant variations in engagements
- dropped the interactive sessions in semester 2
Inf Tutoring Network: using Miro

Occasional sessions developing the theory of change for tutors and tutees that we hoped the network would achieve

Outcome: engagement levels much higher
  - easy to engage in for students who don’t want to speak
  - non-threatening way for students to comment on each others’ contributions
What works best?

• Levels of engagement highest in tutoring network, lowest in Inf1B
• Very different environments - engagement is easily predictable regardless of approach to sessions
• But I feel the good use of appropriate technology and pedagogy can really help small groups online
• I don’t think reusing materials developed for f2f in an online situation is good enough
• Not obvious how to use these approaches in different situations - e.g., how to use Miro for programming
2. How will this affect next year?

- Definite preference to do small group work face to face if possible
- But how can interactive tools enhance that, as well as allow students not physically present to join in?
- Students not engaging is not only a problem in online groups.