NURTURING SUCCESS THROUGH PERSONALISED COMMUNICATION

C. Kaur, T. Cui, J. Luu

Monash University (AUSTRALIA)

Abstract

Research shows that effective teacher-student communication provides a platform in which students are encouraged and motivated to grow both academically and personally. Instructional communication researchers suggest that improved student-faculty communication is able to generate positive education outcomes such as enhanced aspirations, affirmation, confidence, academic and cognitive development, persistence and improved university retention. However, reaching out to students can prove to be difficult when dealing with large and diverse student cohorts. As a result, understanding the needs of individual students is often difficult, thus deterring students from actively engaging and participating in learning activities. Consequently, students lack the ability to connect with teaching staff and their peers, thus losing the ability to succeed in their study. In some cases, they may experience stress and a lack of self-confidence and motivation.

In this paper, we discuss findings of a pilot project where we introduce an intervention process through a personalized communication system in a large postgraduate course. The system implemented facilitates personalized communication through the use of learning analytics. It involves the identification of students at risk where instructors send bulk personalized emails to identified students via a system called Student Relationship Engagement System (SRES) [2]. This marks the beginning of ongoing collaborative monitoring of academic and personal progress. Through collaboration between academic and pastoral support mechanisms, instructors are able to reach out to students who might also be experiencing stress and other mental health issues and encourage them to seek appropriate professional assistance from the university.

There are several key benefits to this process, such as improved student engagement and retention, taking a preventive approach to helping students at risk, reaching out and strengthening relationship with students who may be experiencing personal issues.

In this investigation, we aim to analyse the results from students’ performance, survey and interview responses. In this paper, we analyse and present the current findings based on students’ response to the personalised emails.

Keywords: Teacher-student communication, instructional communication, intervention process, personalised emails.

1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education has seen increasing challenges in recent years. Educators are constantly faced with the problem of dealing with large classes consisting of heterogeneous cohorts with varying levels of literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, large class sizes persist in hindering personalised interactions between teachers and students. Although technology-enabled learning techniques are commonly adopted, providing individualised attention to students proves to be an on-going challenge in large classes. This is also true for most Higher Education institutions worldwide as instructors in large classes find it hard to reach out to all students.

On the other hand, students in large classes feel lost and detached from their peers and instructors. As a result, understanding the needs of individual students is often difficult, thus deterring students from actively engaging and participating in learning activities. Consequently, students lack the ability to connect with teaching staff and their peers, thus losing the ability to succeed in their study. In some cases, they may also experience stress and a lack of self-confidence and motivation.

Instructional communication researchers suggest that improved student-faculty communication is important for all students. Effective student-faculty communication can generate positive education outcomes such as enhanced aspirations, affirmation, confidence, academic and cognitive development,
persistence and improved university retention [1]. In short, it can lead to improved academic performance.

In this paper, we propose a model that facilitates personalised communication between teachers and students. This form of communication aims to improve engagement and retention.

We contribute to the current literature in two ways:

1. We facilitate personalised communication through the use of learning analytics. The students’ results will be used to provide a descriptive analysis and confirm if there was any improvement in their performance.

2. We developed a collaborative intervention model that promotes early intervention. We utilise cross-unit mapping to identify students at risk (STAR) across two core units within the program. The model involves collaborative between academics across these two units.

2 PROJECT CONTEXT

2.1 The pilot

The pilot involved sending personalised emails to a large cohort enrolled in a core unit. Email recipients were selected based on their performance of two in-semester assessment tasks. The results from these tasks were determined as trigger points in identifying STAR. These students were sent an email containing academic support information and were invited to contact the lecturer if they needed any assistance or consultation.

Furthermore, we also identified students who scored well and sent either congratulatory messages. Such messages further enhanced student engagement by reinforcing the positive nature of the teacher/student relationship.

The unit coordinator used the Student Relationship Engagement System (SRES) to send bulk personalised emails to students. The system was developed by a team at the University of Sydney, with the mission to enable facilitators to collect, analyse, and act on data to better engage students at scale. The unit coordinator utilised SRES to:

- Create customised lists of the students based on their internal assessment results;
- Send a personalised email to students on the list from unit coordinator’s personal email account.

2.2 The collaboration between core units

Our project trials the collaboration between two core units within the Business School at Monash University, in an effort to identify STAR. The core units selected for this project have been offered to postgraduate students undertaking the Master of Banking and Finance and Master of Business within a single semester.

Both units are taught in large classes consisting of average annual enrolments of 1,300 students. It’s worth noting that the majority of students are international students. This project involves collaboration and identifies clear implications for educational development, beyond the individual’s immediate practice.

2.3 Project process

Our project is planned to be deployed in three stages:

**Stage 1: Identification - cross units**

In the second stage of the project, unit leaders are to cross-map the lists of STAR in each unit and identify common STAR in both units. Subsequently, unit leaders work with educational designers to collectively send personalised email to the mutual STAR.

By utilising learning analytics within the personalised communication system, we plan to investigate and analyse student response to the communication and monitor their ongoing academic progress.

**Stage 2: Intervention, evaluation and reflection**
In the third stage of the project, identified STAR will be provided with the opportunity to consult with both unit leaders, and be directed to appropriate support and resources.

Participating stakeholders will communicate periodically and monitor students’ academic progress following the intervention. Students will also be encouraged to reflect on the experience and build an action plan for the future.

Stage 3: Consolidation

In the last stage of the project, we will survey and interview STAR on their reactions to our intervention, as well as any impacts of the intervention. This data and findings from the experiment will be consolidated and presented in a report. We also plan to write best practice guidelines on personalised communication and early intervention to share with the community of practice.

2.4 The collaborative intervention model

In this subsection, we describe the dynamics of the collaborative intervention model.

The purpose of our proposed intervention process is to engage with students on available resources that help support their learning. It also reflects a desire for academics to collaborate across disciplines.

A visualisation of the model has been provided as Figure 1.

Firstly, as depicted in the model, through personalised emails, we set up appointments to collectively meet with these students. During the joint consultation, we investigate and identify the possible causes of students’ struggle.

Secondly, by identifying the problems encountered, we are able to direct students to the appropriate academic and pastoral support staff.

Academic support includes working with designated tutors and study buddies. We assign a designated tutor who will help liaise with the unit coordinator and the study buddy. The study buddy provides students with the opportunity to reach out to their peers for academic help. The study buddy is carefully selected by both unit coordinators.

Pastoral care, on the other hand, includes support services such as disability support services, physical and mental health services, etc. It should be noted that most higher education institutions provide support resources that aid and improve students’ wellbeing. However, it is also generally known that not all students are aware or willing to reach out and seek assistance from the support mechanisms.

![Figure 1. Collaborative intervention model](image)
3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Pilot
We have conducted an experiment during our pilot stage of the project.

The participants involved in this experiment were 530 students enrolled for Semester 1 2019. 301 students (56.8%) are female while 229 students (43.2%) are male. 510 students (96.2%) are from 16 different overseas countries. The majority of the international students are from China (437 students, 82.5%) and India (38 students, 7.2%). Among these participants, 80 students failed the first assessment, while approximately 70 of them obtained a HD.

Our discussion of the results can be found in the “Current results and discussion” section.

3.2 Cross-unit collaboration
In this section, we discuss the stage 3 of the collaborative process which includes the collection of data and the instruments utilised to analyse the data.

At the end of the semester, the researchers will recruit participants comprising of students who have received email communications from their lecturers. This list is used to conduct a survey and semi-structured interview. Participation in the research is voluntary.

A series of questions will be asked in the survey so that we are able to gain an understanding of the effects of the personalised emails. In the survey, we measure the student perception of the impact of personalised communication on their learning on a Likert-type scale.

Subsequently, the students who have been identified as STAR in both core units and gone through the collaborative intervention process will be invited to attend a semi-structured interview at the end of the semester. We are expecting a maximum of 5 students, based on our experience. The information collected from the interview will provide the researchers with additional qualitative data, such as any impact of the collaborative intervention model on student learning and overall university experience.

4 CURRENT RESULTS & DISCUSSION
Based on our findings in the pilot, approximately one in four students who received personalised communication replied to the email. There were two in-semester tests during the pilot. A round of emails was sent after each test.

Out of 119 emails sent in round one, 20% of STAR replied, which results in a total of 65 corresponding email communications. Of those who replied, approximately 50% made an effort to consult with the unit coordinator. It was also found that there was a substantial number of students who sought academic assistance during consultation hours with tutors. Although a support link was provided to direct them to library learning advisors, only 2.5% of recipients utilised this resource. This may indicate the tendency for students to reach out to academics and tutors in person for advice.
In round two, there were 4 sets of emails sent out based on students’ performance in class test 2. We reached out to both STAR and high-performing students. Out of 162 emails sent, 25% of recipients replied. Despite the personalised communication from round 1, there were 9 students who failed test 1 and obtained a zero for test 2. Of the emails sent to this group, only two students replied, and one student did not open the email. This may indicate that the frequency of emails should be considered carefully, as over communication to STAR can be counter-productive.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on our findings, it can be seen that a good proportion of the students have responded positively to communication from the unit coordinator. The proactive approach in encouraging student engagement and retention has had a positive impact on students’ learning. Research shows that ‘teachers are at the heart of student engagement’ [4], and hence personalised communication allows teachers to take a hands-on approach to enhance student engagement.

Our proactive approach is preventive in nature. In the existing approach at most institutions, students who fail the final examination are potentially referred to the Academic Progress Committee at the end of the semester. In other words, the current system in place in most tertiary institutions reflects a punitive approach. In our approach, students at risk are identified early in the semester, and they are given multiple support mechanisms to help improve their academic performance.

Given that the communication is personalised and is not sent through a general bulk messaging method, students are more likely to reach out to teaching staff to ask for help. This ensures that students feel safe and supported in their learning [3].

Through personalised communication, we could identify students who might be experiencing stress and other mental health issues. This is especially true when the students who received an email reach out to the unit coordinator or tutor. We could encourage them to seek appropriate professional assistance from the university. Students are more willing to seek and accept such assistance given that personalised communication is perceived as private and confidential communication.

Finally, the social benefits of this mode of communication and other intervention can be extensive. Students’ academic improvement will ultimately result in boosted confidence and self-esteem. This helps augment their ability to succeed in subsequent units and also their entry into the workforce.

It should be noted that despite the obvious benefits of personalised communication and early intervention, the frequency of communication should be carefully considered. Students receive numerous other communications from their department, faculty and the university, due to the availability of various modes of communication. It is our view that over communication can result in students ignoring important emails. In our pilot, it was observed that some students did not open the email sent by the unit coordinator.

Furthermore, there should also be consideration of the emotional impact of such communication. Through system, we were able to observe that some students read the email repeatedly up to a maximum of 30 times. This could be due to experience of stress, or due to a shortfall of the SRES. The system may have captured numerous communications between the unit coordinator, and failed to differentiate this action from the student simply opening the email.

The points raised here require further investigation.

6 FUTURE PLAN

The next phases of this project involves cross-disciplinary collaboration amongst instructors via the model proposed in section 2. The synergy created by such collaboration will help prepare students for the demands of an increasingly complex workplace. Future findings of our project will be reported accordingly.

REFERENCES

