Connect, Learn & Earn: Does gamification promote increased engagement in interpersonal connectivity activities on an online orientation programme for postgraduate students?

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Does gamification promote increased engagement in interpersonal connectivity activities on an online orientation programme for postgraduate students?

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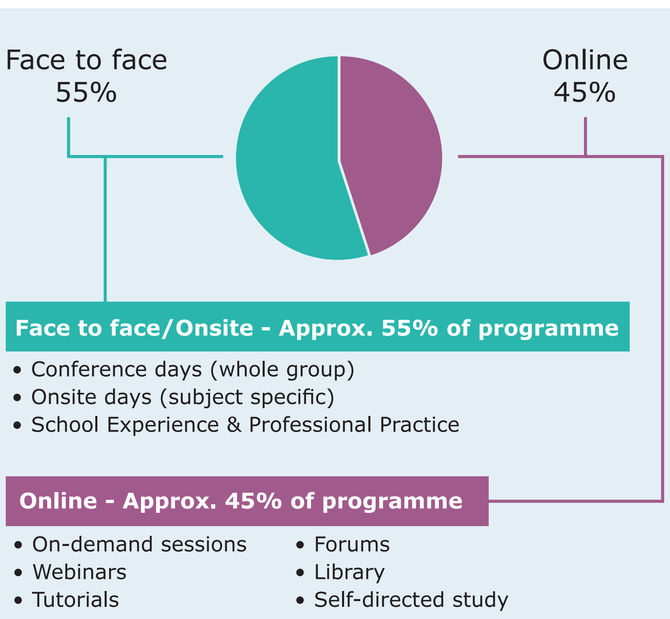
1. BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Hibernia College is a QQI-accredited provider of Professional Master in Education programmes in primary and post-primary education. Both are two-year blended programmes and cohorts commence in April and September each year.

It is widely recognised that creating a vibrant learning community is a key aspect of online learning[1,2]. To this end, at the start of the programme, student teachers undertake a highly interactive two-week online orientation programme, complemented by a one-day face-to-face event.

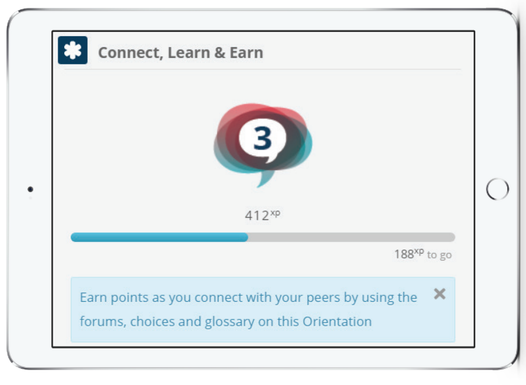
The orientation introduces student teachers to:

- Their programme
- Their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- Each other



To drive this community building further, in its September 2018 orientation programme, Hibernia College introduced a gamification[3] tool that rewarded participation in activities that required interaction with peers. The tool, which we called Connect, Learn & Earn, awarded experience ('XP') points for activities such as:

- Reading and posting in various discussion forums dedicated to different topics
- Responding to polls
- Reading content pages relating to blogging
- Reading and posting in a glossary for getting to know one another



2. METHODOLOGY

After orientation, quantitative and qualitative data were analysed.

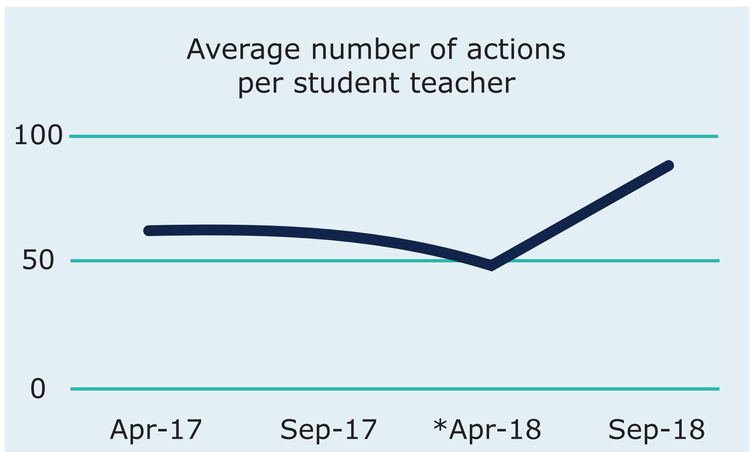
VLE data showing student activity was used to determine whether there was an increase in engagement in activities that required interaction with peers following the introduction of the gamification tool.

Student teachers' reactions to the tool were analysed using qualitative data extracted from a post-orientation survey.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Quantitative Data

The VLE data showed a marked increase in engagement in peer-to-peer activities among the 685 student teachers following the introduction of the gamification tool.

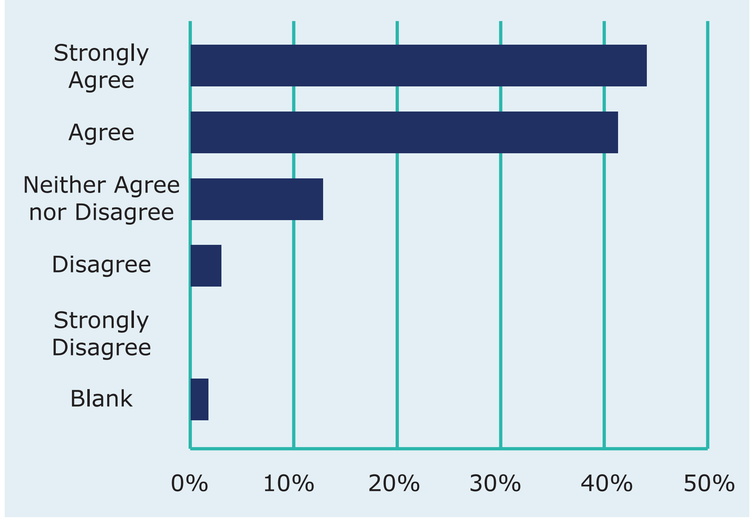


*In April 2018, there was a delay in releasing the online orientation and engagement throughout was decreased.

3.2 Qualitative Data

Students are surveyed after each orientation. For the September 2018 cohort, two questions on gamification were added to this survey. The 421 student teachers who participated in the survey responded as follows:

Q 'The presence of the Connect, Learn & Earn block motivated me to participate more in the online orientation activities that promoted connecting with my peers'.



Q 'What are your thoughts on the Connect, Learn & Earn block?' The main sentiment that emerged from these responses was motivation.

"'I found it to be a good motivational tool and as both a shy and mature student I felt it aided me in pushing me out of my comfort zone.'

"'I think it is a very motivational tool. Seeing the XP points increase gives a sense of achievement and makes me want to do more to see those points increase. It made me interact on discussions and blogs with my fellow students. It is a great motivator to increase interaction!'

The vast majority of feedback was positive. Student teachers felt that the tool:

- Helped to motivate them to engage and complete the tasks
- Was fun and competitive
- Made it easier to talk to their classmates at the face-to-face event

A small minority felt it was childish or uninteresting, or that it forced participation.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the gamification tool had the intended effect of increasing engagement with the Connect, Learn & Earn activities and socialisation.

The results appear to be in line with the literature on gamification[1,2,3,4.] Further analysis is required to determine the precise extent to which gamification affected engagement and why. It would also be worthwhile to explore student teachers' reasons for feeling motivated by the gamification tool. The tool will be implemented again in April 2019 and logs will be compared against the September 2018 data to see if the increase in engagement is maintained.

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