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Alleviating student anxiety using messaging apps

Jonathan Sim explains how he supported his class remotely using the Telegram messaging app to keep a regular flow of communication and reassure students they were not alone in having queries

Student engagement   Course design and delivery   Asia   Video

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Alleviating student anxiety through regular messaging

Key Details

This video will cover:

00:25 What drives student anxieties and their impact on learning

02:26 Using the Telegram messaging app as a learning support system when teaching online

03:54 Using the Telegram helpline to foster a positive learning culture

Transcript

Hello, my name is Jonathan Sim. I'm an instructor at the National University of Singapore, where I teach an interdisciplinary module, computational reasoning, to 700 students in arts and social sciences each semester. Now I've been teaching since 2017, and I found that there are many, many challenges to interdisciplinary learning that are unique to this generation of students.

In my discussion with students, I found that many of them have high levels of anxiety when it comes to learning something outside their intended major.

And many students of this generation, you know, they've made it to university without encountering failure in their prior years of schooling, and so having to do a module outside what they are competent or familiar with, oh, that introduces the idea that they might have to experience failure for the very, very first time.

And this induces a great deal of stress and anxiety in them. Here I wish to highlight that this problem is not unique to Singaporean students alone. In fact, I have encountered many international students enrolled in my module voicing the exact same anxieties towards interdisciplinary learning.

Now this issue is compounded when the model is taught in the blended learning format, where students learn part of the module in isolation at home.

There they cannot see their peers, and they cannot compare how they are doing with respect to their classmates. Because of these anxieties – oh, you know students, they imagine that there are so many others doing better than them, and the moment they face a struggle, they are quick to imagine that they are the only ones encountering it, struggling with it.

So this further perpetuates the stress, and it affects their motivation to learn as they do not see any chance or hope in doing well. This also affects students' willingness to ask for help.

They are afraid of wasting the instructor's time or embarrassing themselves by saying the wrong thing, so they feel a need to prepare themselves well. However, I've come to realise that, because the student is dealing with a subject so alien, so foreign to them, they sometimes struggle in trying to articulate their questions.

And in such a situation, these students, they never reach a situation where they feel ready enough to approach the instructor for help.

Overall, these anxieties, this self-imposed stress, they inhibit students from learning effectively, and I found that these issues, they must be addressed first if we want to assure and motivate students to learn well in their interdisciplinary modules.

In my years of teaching, the Telegram messaging app has become a very integral support system for me as an educator. It helps to alleviate students' anxieties and empower them in their learning. So each semester, I create a Telegram helpline where students can seek help directly from me or from one of my teaching assistants.

It allows me to interact very closely with them. It allows me to show them that I'm serious in wanting to help them learn well. I answer questions without judgement, I collect the new questions and add to my library of questions and answers that everyone can access for their benefit at any time.

Now Telegram is a very, very powerful platform because students can seek help even anonymously. And it really, really helps with student motivation because students can see movement on the helpline in the form of other students asking for help, and that really motivates them to get started on the work, because they know they can benefit from the stream of questions and answers that are coming in on the helpline now.

The questions also make visible the kinds of struggles that their peers face, so students see this and it makes them aware that they are not struggling alone. So it helps them feel more confident about their learning and about themselves.

And more importantly, it greatly reduces their anxieties over learning something so new, so daunting, knowing that they can come to me or my teaching assistants for help, even if they struggle to articulate the problem because we will help them to figure it out together.

Now what I really love about the helpline is that it allows me to shift and foster a very positive learning culture for students. It allows me to demonstrate good learning qualities, good learning values, and shift the mindset away from competitiveness to that of collaboration.

And as I foster trust in my students and create a safe environment for them to seek help, students, more students begin to participate actively on the helpline in helping to answer the questions posed by their peers. And I know I've succeeded with cultivating that positive learning culture when I can see other students regularly helping one another with the struggles on the platform. Knowing that help is just a text message away or that there is a comprehensive library of questions and answers that they can refer to anytime to verify their understanding, this empowers students greatly.

They recognise that it is possible to master something so completely new and foreign to them entirely on their own, and they would not have to face the situation of discovering that they are not good enough.

So, to conclude, I just want to say I found the Telegram helpline to be such a wonderful learning tool because it helps to alleviate a lot of the anxieties and stress that students encounter with interdisciplinary learning.

Students know that help is readily available every step of the way. And they know, they are aware, that they are not struggling alone; that the helpline helps to foster that community of learning; that they know they are not struggling alone and they can rely on one another for help, not to compete for grades but to really discover and learn with one another.

So, thank you so much for listening and I hope this has been helpful for you. So, see you, bye.

This video was produced by Jonathan Sim, an instructor in the department of philosophy, National University of Singapore (https://nus.edu.sg/).