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# Crynoldebau / abstracts

Engaged and on Fire: Relational Online Courses

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A few years ago a mature, work based MA student commented at the end of a module that the experience was 'why he had returned to study and what had been missing so far'. Apart from making sure this was at the top of the module evaluation report for the exam committee, I asked him why. The answer was that we had really debated some interesting and practically important ideas. As a second year, part-time student his review was that he had learnt a lot, but debated and discussed little. It remains a criticism of on-line programmes that the focus on information exchange is stronger than on debate.

What emerged from that encounter was, as the student put it, the need for participants to be both ‘engaged and on fire’ in their studies. At the heart of this was the question of relationships - we already knew this and organised block teaching weeks to get students together. Relationships were fostered and students felt able to debate and disagree on matters they recognised as important to their peers, but the effect was short lived.

The use of webinars allowed for ongoing real time engagement which enhanced positive relationships between students. The emergence of Twitter and smartphones offered the opportunity (from about 2007) to use micro-blogging to support small interactions between students, and Facebook developed this in shifting study conversations into a more informal (virtual) space. As mobile technologies grew the use of regular, visual, synchronous interactions became easier to support and debate between students improved.

The literature has, largely, remained unhelpfully silent in terms of conceptualising this shift.

In a recent paper, I have more formally considered the question of the role of mobile technologies to support positive pedagogically helpful relationships. In this presentation I draw on my own experiences of on-line learning to identify what higher education ought to be doing to ensure students are 'engaged and on fire'.